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Essays in theatrical criticism.



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ESSAYS

IN

THEATRICAL CRITICISM.

BY
MOWBRAY MORRIS.

'To the Tennis Court, and there saw the King play at Tennis, and others ; but to see how the King's play was extolled without any cause at all, was a loathsome sight, though sometimes, indeed, he did play very well and deserved to be commended ; but such open flattery is beastly.'—PEPY'S DIARY ; *Jan. 4th, 1663-4.*

' Mais aussi pardonnez, ai plein de ce beau zèle,
De tous vos pas fameux observateur fidèle,
Quelquefois du bon or je sépare le faux,
Et des auteurs grossiers j'attaque les défauts ;
Censeur un peu fâcheux, mais souvent nécessaire,
Plus enclin à blâmer, que savant à bien faire.'

BOILEAU, *Art Poétique.*

LONDON :
REMINGTON & Co.,
134, NEW BOND STREET, W.

1882.



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INTRODUCTION.

THE most part of this little volume has already appeared before in one shape or other. The Essays on 'The Stage as It is,' and 'Othello at the Lyceum,' are reprinted, with some slight alterations, from *Macmillan's Magazine*. The rest, with the exception of 'A School of Dramatic Art,' are based upon articles contributed to one of our daily papers within the last six years. I have tried to make them something more than mere reprints; but there is so much of this sort of work abroad now, and the feeling against it is, and with too good reason, so strong, that I can hardly hope this preliminary confession is likely to attract a very numerous body of readers. Surely, I hear them say, a volume so made up can be but another contribution to the mass of rubbish which, in Mr. Matthew Arnold's terribly

plain language, is so plentifully shot around us to-day. Well, no doubt one would do better to help in clearing away rather than in increasing our contemporary dust-heap ; and indeed, though in its preparation I have ever kept before me a certain fixed design, I do not know that for my own part I can offer any other excuse for my contribution than vanity. Working, as so long I have been, under the Telamonian shield of the editorial 'we,' I have, I will confess, a desire to 'come forth into the light of day,' and cry with Coriolanus

'Alone, I did it !'

Not, indeed, that I have ever fluttered dove-cots ! The slings and arrows of what I have sometimes with such pain heard styled my 'outrageous' criticism, have fallen, I am sadly conscious, so far short of their mark. But such as they are I have long felt a desire to gather up some of the least ineffectual, or such, let me rather say, as I have fondly considered so ; to keep them by me for a moment or two, and by any others who may care to look them over either to praise them or to blame. Here and there a voice has in time past been good enough to speak not altogether disparagingly of them ; and many, of course, have spoken much more distinctly to a very different effect. I feel I should like to give both friendly critics and others some more solid objects for

contemplation than those apparitions of a day which are all I have hitherto been able to offer.

And yet with all my vanity, I feel too, I must own, no little trepidation. Heine, who could certainly take care of himself as well as most men, and was not averse to warfare, was yet moved to confess that he had no idea Germany could have produced so many rotten apples as flew about his head on the publication of *Atta Troll*. I am not indeed so vain as to suppose that here, in our busy England, any one will be at the trouble to fling so much even as a rotten apple at my insignificant head, nevertheless I am well conscious how great the danger he, in these days, runs who meddles with theatrical matters, and meddles not to praise. How can I not but be conscious! for six years now have I meddled with them, and found, alas, so little to praise! And indeed it seems to me as though in the atmosphere of the footlights human nature must take a fresh departure; for instead of leaning no unwilling ear to the depreciation of one's best friend's work, as elsewhere we are all of us so prone to do, here only do we take up arms in his cause, and with a fierceness more than Bulgarian, we

‘Stamp, and roar, and chafe,
And swear not Atticus himself is safe!’

I know not why it is, but whereas in almost every other of human works, it is permitted to

find a falling off from absolute perfection without incurring the odium of the basest and blackest passions of humanity, yet the moment one passes through the dragon-wardered portals of the theatre, the slightest breath of disapproval must be inspired only, as poor Leigh Hunt found in his time, by envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness.

And there is no middle course; there must be neither doubt nor hesitation in our allegiance; our love is but a niggardly and ignoble passion,

‘if ’tis not the same

Through joy and through torment, through glory and shame.’

‘The true artist,’ says Lessing, ‘will not even believe that we see and comprehend his perfections, however much noise we may make about them, until he perceives that we also have an eye and an ear for his shortcomings. He will smile to himself at our unreserved admiration, and only the praise of him who also has courage to blame him, will touch him nearly.’ Alas! I fear it is hardly so with the artists of our English theatre to-day. But I will do my spiriting as gently as may be; if I am walking to my doom, at least I will strive to walk, like Agag, delicately.

Yet not more delicately than may be consistent with getting forward at all; for indeed it seems to me, that our theatrical state has come to the pass

it has, from a little too much of this delicacy, a little too much suppression of facts. Some one—I think it was Cardinal Newman, in his earlier days—has said that it is not always necessary to speak at all, but that if one does speak, one is bound to speak the truth. Now it is quite conceivable that a man who cares only to concern himself with things that are ‘lovely and of good report,’ should not be very much interested, just at present, in writing about the theatre; but now, if it ever was, is it necessary that if he does write, he should write at least of things as they really are, and not as he would have them be. To be sure Goethe has said, ‘If I call *bad* bad, what do I gain?’ but in the next breath he says, ‘If I call *good* bad, I do a great deal of mischief;’ and he might have gone on to show his friend what greater mischief still may be done by calling *bad* good. It is with trying to do this as prettily as they can that the critics of our theatre appear chiefly to occupy themselves at present. Whether they err from indifference, or kindness, or from some other cause, I will not now stop to enquire; but certainly they are, to say the least, prone to sundry ‘blenches,’ or wanderings from the straight path, which really give the heart of our theatre anything but ‘another youth,’ whatever its indulgent admirers may think. And this being so, it seems to me above all things necessary at the present time, that *bad* should be called bad in as

clear a voice as possible. 'Society,' says Emerson, 'has at all times the same want, namely, of one sane man with adequate powers of expression to hold up each object of monomania in its right relations.' Far be it from me to parade myself as this 'one man' needful; but it seems to me we are all concerned, each according to his light, in preserving the necessary balance of sanity, in theatrical no less than in other and more important matters.

And indeed in theatrical matters, if we are to consider them, as so many now seem disposed to consider them, worth any serious thought, it does seem to me that a little more of this sanity is pre-eminently desirable. When we find, for example, a writer at one moment raving in a Bacchic frenzy of the 'hungry intensity,' the 'fragrant fun,' and 'the Circe-like spells' of an actress, and at another 'damning her with the faintest praise,' it is surely obvious that this balance is not very well preserved. How can it be preserved when the relations between the critic and the objects of his criticism are so very intimate and personal as they now, it is notorious, too often are? Goethe, certainly a man of self-control and balance if ever there was one, has confessed the great difficulty he found in keeping himself clear of extraneous circumstances in his management of the Weimar theatre, lest he should become 'like a compass, which cannot point

right when under the influence of a magnet at its side.' There are not, I think, many of us who may to-day rush in where Goethe feared to tread. Critics are, after all, but mortal, and like all mortals liable to go astray sometimes, in their feelings, if not in their judgments. A soft heart and a nature prone to sentiment are sweet and precious gifts, yet gifts surely not to be recklessly or too lavishly enjoyed. The atmosphere of the theatre is not, as Johnson confessed to Garrick, favourable to a rigid asceticism; and although there are some, I am sure, who could walk unharmed through the most fiery furnace, yet one cannot but remember the 'charming Mary Montagu's' lines :

' Let this great maxim be my virtue's guide ;
In part she is to blame that has been try'd ;
He comes too near, that comes to be deny'd.'

And by not 'coming too near' one gets really so much clearer a view of things as a whole. Sweet indeed it is, as the same witty lady has sung,

' When the long hours of the public are past
To meet with champagne and a chicken at last.'

Then, as the singer goes on :

' May every fond pleasure that moment endear ;
Be banished afar both discretion and fear !'

But banished, indeed, will be discretion when it is with the Macbeth or the Romeo

of the 'long public hours,' that we share these delightful solaces; for surely then it cannot but be that the morning's reflection will be, to say the least, a little tinged and mellowed by the sweet communion of the night. In every case it is so difficult to separate the personality of the workman from his work, and yet so necessary, if we are to get a cool impartial judgment of the latter—to ascertain, not its relative and temporary significance, but its positive and lasting value; with the actor's work, where personality counts for so much, this must be more difficult, it seems to me, than with any other. And when the critic is bound by ties of personal friendship, or, as may possibly happen, by ties of personal interest, to the actor, it is surely inevitable, while human nature is what it is, that his judgment should be a little, like the dyer's hand, 'subdued to what it works in'—inevitable that he should regard his Macbeth, not as the brave weak man overthrown by ambition and his terrible wife, but as a charming liberal dispenser of champagne and chicken, and other things, perhaps even more convenient. It may be I am altogether wrong, and guilty, though, indeed, most unwittingly, of a gross injustice; but surely one would sooner suppose a clever man overcome by the soft allurements of friendship, than going astray, as Johnson owned even he once did, through 'sheer ignorance.' Yet on one

of these two horns I cannot but think some of our theatrical critics must perforce be content to sit.

Let us take, for example, a play which some of us may remember to have seen in the autumn of last year at Drury Lane, the play of *Youth*—if play that can be called, which was in truth no more than a medley of rather commonplace carpentering and scene-painting. However, no one of course, expects to see at Drury Lane in its present condition, any very intellectual or refined order of entertainment, and the spectacle, with which, no doubt, many honest souls contrived to be vastly excited, might have been suffered to pass in silence well enough. But on the contrary, certain critics took it upon themselves to chant its praises in strains which might have been thought adequate almost to the deserts of a *Lear*, or a *Twelfth Night*. One, in *The Illustrated London News*, did indeed confine himself more to the material aspect of things, and vented his enthusiasm in such general terms as a ‘distinct, unequivocally triumphant and well-deserved success,’ pronouncing its tawdry panorama ‘more than worthy of the skilfullest *tableaux* of the Meiningers.’ But another, in the *Daily Telegraph*, that *leonum nutrix*! contrived to find in this barren stuff ‘a forcible lesson of *the stern truth of life*!’—found in it again (speaking from another oracle, Delian and Patarean Apollo!) ‘*the one touch of*

nature which lights to success!' The one touch of nature! really, when one remembers from whose lips these words first fell, such writing as this seems, if I may say so, little short of profanity.

Or take again the performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, which still as I write may be seen at the Lyceum, a piece of work, one need hardly say, 'with all its imperfections on its head,' of a very different order to *Youth* at Drury Lane. It is not possible to conceive anything more lamentably, more hopelessly bad, than Mr. Irving's *Romeo*. This every one, at all able to preserve their balance in the customary *engouement* of a first night, felt and said; they sat in their stalls and 'stared at each other with a wild surmise,' wondering what the critics would have to say about it next day. Well, the critics had a good deal to say about it next day. One of them found the actor 'entitled to generous appreciation;' another, that his *Romeo* came 'in the likeness of a sigh;' a third, with a curious infelicity of phrase, that 'his delivery was always intelligent.' Others, on the other hand, though they well nigh exhausted the English language in descriptions of the scenery, dresses, and decorations, were content for the acting to confess that it 'could not now be adequately dealt with,' or preferred to 'reserve serious criticism for another occasion.' But not one of them—for what reason I will not pretend

to decide—took the occasion to lay his finger on the real defect of the performance, and the lesson to be learned from it—the total want of self-judgment and self-restraint, the total want of respect for his audience, and one would almost think for himself, which could allow an actor voluntarily to select a part from which nature and his own ideas of his own art, had alike so insuperably barred him. That Mr. Irving should play Romeo badly mattered little; every actor who has ever essayed the part has probably played it more or less badly, though some of course very much more so than others; but that he should delight to parade his worst defects in their worst light mattered much. For it is this, this lamentable want of balance, of repression, of sanity, this lamentable exaltation of the individual at the expense of his work, which is the characteristic defect of our modern theatre; and it is with the exposure of this fatal ‘object of monomania’ that every critic, who, not content with leaving bad alone, yet wishes rather to build up than to pull down, will, as it seems to me, do well to concern himself most seriously at the present time. While the present state of things is not only allowed but encouraged, it is small wonder that the actor should, as he is now too apt to do,

‘Assume the god,
Affect to nod;’

And seem to shake the spheres.’

He has ever been, as Pepys in his day complained, something prone—which of us, indeed is not prone?—to mistake the ‘puff of a dunce’ for fame; and certainly there is ‘ample room and verge enough’ for the mistake to-day. Certainly we have only ourselves to blame if it is to-day with our theatres, as it was with Churchill’s,

‘The town’s decisions they no more admit,
 Themselves alone the arbiters of wit;
 And scorn the jurisdiction of that court
 To which they owe their being and support.’

It is, I have already said, impossible to decide from what particular cause theatrical criticism has fallen into its present state of bondage. I have myself heard one of the brotherhood say that newspaper editors seem to think anybody qualified for the post of what is commonly, but somewhat erroneously known as a ‘dramatic critic;’ and certainly, if one may judge from the circumstances that attended a recent trial, the business does not seem to be held generally in very great repute. Yet it cannot have been always so; Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Charles Lamb, were professed critics; Byron and Coleridge and Walter Scott did not think the theatres below their serious regard; and even now the profession can number among its followers some writers at least of considerable acuteness, intelligence, and learning. ‘But how,’ says Emerson, ‘how can he’ (the writer) ‘be honoured when he does not

honour himself; when he loses himself in the crowd; when he is no longer the lawgiver, but the sycophant, ducking to the giddy opinion of a reckless public?' Mr. Percy Fitzgerald, in his recent *Recreations of a Literary Man*, which must certainly rank with Serjeant Ballantyne's *Experiences*, as one of the most astonishing specimens of modern literature—has given it as his opinion that, when one considers the vast expense which the production of a new play now-a-days entails, it is cruel to say a word against it; and indeed this seems to be very much the view that certain editors of newspapers are disposed to take of the matter. 'Why do you not write your own criticisms?' asked old Mrs. Garrick once of Edmund Kean; 'Davy always did.' Really, if this is the editorial idea of criticism, one hardly sees why Davy's successors should not do as Davy did, in that respect at any rate. For this is plainly to make of criticism only another and gratuitous form of theatrical advertisement; and seeing how large a space is already given in our daily papers to these interesting and ingenious documents, this is surely a little superfluous. The critic's proper business is to be the mouthpiece to the actor of intelligent and impartial opinion; if Mr. Fitzgerald's view be the correct one, he can be no more than the mouthpiece of the actor to a slavish and unthinking public.

Of course the Editors may answer that the conditions of our theatre are not now what they were in the days of Lamb, Hunt, and Hazlitt; that the subject-matter afforded to such writers was afforded by such talents as the great family of the Kembles, Kean, Young, Liston, Macready, and so forth, while the subject-matter our present critics get is derived from work of, to say the least, not quite such conspicuous mark. No doubt this is true enough; and no one—no one, that is to say, outside the theatre—would perhaps care to make it a very grave cause of complaint if they found an editor altogether ignoring a considerable portion of the contemporary theatre. But it is not so; on the contrary, the very reverse is really the case. Never before has the work of our theatres been so copiously and so elaborately reported. Not only the legitimate work, as one may call it; the door of that mysterious, and to many so fascinating region known as ‘behind the scenes’ is thrown open, and we are invited to see the heroes and heroines of the stage in all their luxurious privacy. A year or two ago Mr. Irving gave a supper to some of his friends in commemoration of one of his many triumphs, and the newspapers, with scarcely an exception, devoted as much space almost to the festivities as though it had been a Royal marriage, or an International Conference of Ministers. The bill of fare was set forth in all its Apician splendour; the price of the

cigars smoked, the vintages of the wine drunk, even the speeches of the happy banqueters—not a detail was left unrecorded. Still more recently, a pretty lady having, like Shakespeare, exhausted one world, imagined a new one, and went upon the stage to find it. On this occasion, to be sure, the chorus was not quite so universal. Nevertheless one paper, and that no insignificant one, went into a perfect frenzy of admiration; the colour of the lucky novice's caps, the fit of her gowns, were given with a *gusto* that would not have disgraced *Le Follet*, while the beauties of her person were appraised with an almost anatomical minuteness of detail that must, one would think, have been embarrassing even to a pretty woman. And only the other day the same journal gravely, in the name of England, wished happiness to a notorious French actress who had made a hasty marriage with one of her company. Surely, then, it cannot be said that our editors are disposed to ignore the theatre, or any of its works.

‘If the newspapers were united,’ wrote Leigh Hunt of certain nuisances of his own day, ‘they might overthrow the farci-comic writers in a month.’ And surely the newspapers might do much, if they would, to better our theatrical condition to-day. We have seen how the critics now find themselves so often compelled to say, ‘the acting cannot now be adequately dealt with;’ ‘serious criticism must be reserved for another

occasion,' and so forth. The other occasion, of course, never comes, and often, no doubt, the critic is glad enough to shelter himself under these Delphic generalities. But how, if he were writing seriously, how can it be otherwise? That editorial law which appears to regard priority of utterance as the essential feature of criticism, must inevitably foster, even in the most practised intellects, much hasty writing and superficial judgments, must inevitably retard all cool and balanced thought. Even the clearest head, the most steadfast will, must falter and grow dim, one would think, a little amid all the vapid noise and adulation of a 'first night.' What scope has such qualities for exercise there,

' While all its throats the gallery extends,
And all the thunder of the pit ascends.'

The first performance of a new play, the first appearance of a new player, are now, it is notorious, no more than a dress rehearsal to which friends are invited as to a private performance of amateurs, and to which the friends go, as they go to the 'private view' of a picture-gallery, not to see, so much as to be seen. Even in critical Paris, matters, it is said, are not much better. It was but the other day that M. Sarcey told us how the old race is dying out, the famous critics of the great 'first nights' at the Théâtre

Français, 'educated persons, men of taste, who went to the play *not to be seen, but to see.*' An audience thus collected is bound to applaud; whatever it may think, whatever even it may say, applaud it must; and it is but the echo of their applause which we find so often next morning in our newspapers. How should it not be! It is hardly in accordance, I say, with human nature that a critic, with the best intentions, should not receive some little bias from the infatuation around him, should not let his judgment go a little along with the others that he hears so clearly and so cordially expressed on all sides. It is not perhaps one man in a thousand whom one could praise for the self-possession of Codrus;

'Pit, box, and gall'ry in convulsions hurl'd,
Thou stand'st unshook amidst a bursting world.'

And really, even where the work is good, and deserves praise, surely all this press and hurry of 'criticism' is so unnecessary, so unreasonable. For unreasonable it surely is to say on the one hand, that the theatre is a great power, a power demanding intelligent consideration and liberal patronage, and on the other, to rank it only as an item of news, to rate its work no higher than the last fashionable marriage, or the last fashionable trial. So far as the mere chronicling of the event goes, that I think might well be left to the

advertisements, which are copious enough in all conscience. It is the business of the manager to advertise his wares, of course ; but it is the business of the critic, I would submit, to pronounce upon them, and it certainly seems to me a little unfair, both to the seller and buyer, and to him too, the critic, to insist that he should do so off hand, should, like Cowper's fashionable clergyman,

‘ huddle up his work,
And with a well-bred whisper close the scene.’

One has but to glance at the work furnished by such of our weekly papers as occupy themselves at all seriously with the theatre, to see how different the conditions under which they see things ; how different, and how far more enlightening. And when, as is, I believe, not seldom the case, the same pen furnishes both, the comparison is, of course, even more startling and conclusive.

Nay, and I cannot but think that the critics must be in some degree themselves to blame for the conditions under which their daily work is at present done ; that they might, if they chose, inaugurate, might *compel* a more liberal state of things. Some little while ago I read in a theatrical paper that the ‘ coming dramatist must be preceded by the coming critic.’ He must be preceded by other things as well, but among them it seems to me, most certainly, by the critic.

For with criticism it mainly rests to make the way plain for the dramatist ; to promote a larger and saner intellectual atmosphere in which it will be possible, as it is not now possible, for the dramatist to work unhampered by alien whims and alien personalities ; in which he shall not follow, as he now does, the public taste, but lead it ; in which he shall be, what he is not now, the master, and not the servant of the actor. And this can only be when criticism recognises, as it too seldom recognises now, that its business is not with the actor himself, but the *actor's work* ; when it can say, as Churchill said,

‘The stage I choose—a subject fair and free—
 ’Tis yours—’tis mine—’tis public property.
 All common exhibitions open lie
 For praise or censure to the common eye.’

The critic must recognise that it is not his business to play the part of chorus to the public voice, still less of chorus to the Manager’s advertisements ; but to play the part rather of such a Chorus as Horace has described :—

‘Ille bonis faveatque et consilietur amice,
 Et regat iratos, et amet pacare tumentes ;
Ille dapes, laudet mensæ brevis, ille salubres
Justitiam legesque, et apertis otia portis,
 Ille tegat commissa, Deosque precetur et oret,
Ut redeat miseris, abeat fortuna superbis.’

I am sure the many able and experienced writers who treat of these matters will go along

with me, so far at least, if no farther. Of those whose 'judgments' are inspired by the interests or passions of the moment—those Januses of criticism who hunt with the hare and run with the hounds, who write plays, as one may say, with one hand, and 'criticisms' with the other, I do not speak. They are what they are, and find their account, no doubt, in being so. But the others—the men whose work, checked and retarded as it is, is still so copious, so skilful, and so interesting—they, I am sure, however much they may differ from me on points of detail, will go along with me, as I have said, in acknowledging the want of a freer and more fruitful state of things—in acknowledging the want, at least, if not in bestirring themselves to supply it, as I cannot but think they might, if they would; *Tendentque manus ripæ ulterioris amore*, though. 'time, and strife, and the world's lot' may unite to keep them on the hither side. Even to them, with hearts more open than the day to melting charity, with heads equipped for every form of drama known to Polonius—even to them, the moment, I am sure, must sometimes come when in their souls they recognise the truth of Juliet's regretful cry,

'Bondage is hoarse, and may not speak aloud!'

A REVIEW OF THE PAST YEAR.

IN an essay, to which I have been greatly indebted in the course of this volume, Mr. Matthew Arnold expresses his conviction that our modern drama, when it comes, will be something different from that French drama to which our theatre is so largely indebted,—something different and better. And this is certainly cheering, for Mr. Arnold, as we all know, is by no means disposed to rest in satisfaction on the existing state of things around us, things literary, social, political, or whatsoever else goes to make up the *farrago* of our modern existence. But he does more than this; he formulates a new theatrical organisation which will, he believes, help on this happy consummation, nay, will almost, as he seems to think, necessitate it. Elsewhere I have ventured to examine his theory somewhat more closely, so for the present I will say no more than this—that it is something altogether so different from the state of chaos in which our theatre so contentedly rests, that the

imagination, narrowed and blunted in this long night of ignorance and self-sufficiency, is hardly able to take in all the possibilities which may come to light in the dawn of this new golden age. But if we glance, as I now propose to do, at the work the past year has brought forth, it is not, perhaps, very easy to discover the germ from which the new drama is to spring. So far as our actors are concerned, though they are not, whatever public opinion may seem to assure them, the beginning and the end of the drama—perhaps there is no occasion to be very despairing. If they have been able to show nothing very fine or stimulating, their work has been perhaps on the whole as satisfying as we could, in the circumstances, have expected it to be. But the fresh material they have found to work with—the new material, one would rather say, for the really good, the best, will always be fresh—has not been of a very plastic or enduring nature. Of strictly native work, there have been only three plays produced of any real seriousness, and those have been *The Cup*, by Mr. Tennyson, Mr. Wills's *Juanna*, and Mr. 'Raleigh's' *Queen and Cardinal*.

Whenever a new play appears, claiming to rank with the poetic drama, and failing to establish its claim, straightway a cry is raised that the days of the poetic drama are past; that the public will not now suffer, with any great measure of gladness,

five acts and blank verse. Perhaps this is so ; and, indeed, it may well be so, seeing what other days have come, and how strange a conception of poetry has arisen, which can rank the author of such works as *Hernani* and *Lucrezia Borgia* with the authors of *Agamemnon* and *Macbeth*. Still the experience of later years will, perhaps, have hardly quite assured impartial judges of the necessity for this lamentation. There seems, indeed, to exist in so many minds a strange confusion between poetry and poetical language. Mr. Tennyson, of course, stands apart from our other writers of stage verse ; yet to find Mr. Tennyson's best poetry one would not, I think, go to his plays. *The Cup* had its success, certainly, but it was rather of that sort which the French call *un succès de vogue*. It was Mr. Tennyson's work, and it was produced at the Lyceum, and adorned, moreover, with some of the most sumptuous and picturesque decorations that even our age of scenic splendour has yet contrived. And compared with other excursions into the same region which have found acceptance and applause in these days, with such plays, for example, as *Eugene Aram* or *Charles I.*, as *Pygmalion and Galatea*, or *Broken Hearts*, no doubt it may claim to be called a poetical drama. But compare it with the real poetical drama of our theatre, the drama, I will not say of Shakespeare, but of Beaumont and Fletcher, of Ford, Webster, and

others, of lesser note but still of the same lineage—the work is altogether of another order, of another order of poetry, and another order of drama. Nay, though much less successful, *Queen Mary* must rank, I think, higher than *The Cup*, higher both for its poetical and its dramatic qualities. The latter, no doubt, was a pretty picture, and pretty pictures will always please upon the stage; but a drama, to endure, must be something more than this. It must have life, human life, humanity. Now, in *Queen Mary*, to be sure, the humanity was not very rich or attractive, but it was there. It was not there in *The Cup*. Let us try them both by a test which is the only true test of a play. *Queen Mary*, if skilfully brought within the compass of the stage and finely acted—neither of which fortunes fell to its lot at the Lyceum—might always be seen with a certain satisfaction by those who care for the serious work of the theatre. But it is impossible to conceive the other play without Mr. Irving and Miss Terry, without the beautiful decorations of the Lyceum, the Galatian landscape, and the Galatian shrine. In short, to say it once again, the one was written for a particular theatre and particular actors—for a theatre, moreover, and for actors working under particular and abnormal conditions—the other was written for the stage.

The other specimens of this form of drama, *Juanna* and *Queen and Cardinal*, must rank still

lower in the scale ; the latter, indeed, very much lower. Of Mr. ' Raleigh's ' play, indeed, one hardly knows what to say. As it appears to have been written many years ago, though acted only the other day, one may assume it to have been written for the proper purpose of plays—that is, for the stage generally ; and therein it differs, and for the better, from Mr. Wills's *Juanna*, which was expressly designed for Madame Modjeska. One may allow, too, that his work was not seen under very felicitous conditions in the somewhat poorly-graced hands selected to present it. Still, even with these allowances, it is hard to find much to say for it. The author dared, one cannot but feel, a little too greatly in his choice of subject. Perhaps our writers, whatever their shortcomings may be, can produce work of at least a more satisfying theatrical value than Shakespeare's, but it will be as well, at any rate for the present, to leave to him the things that are his. It was inevitable that a dramatist who chose to bring upon the stage figures so familiar as Henry and Wolsey, Anne Boleyn and Catherine of Arragon, should challenge, however unwittingly, comparisons with the author of *Henry the Eighth* ; inevitable, too, Mr. ' Raleigh ' will, I am sure, pardon me for saying, that the challenger should fall a little into the background. Let this, however, be said, that the disfavour it received from the public is not so much a proof that the day of the

poetical drama is gone, as a suggestion that there still remains the power of distinguishing between the true poetical drama and the false, and a disinclination for the latter. But Mr. Wills's work was of a higher order than this. Mr. Wills has done some good work for the theatre in his time, more refined and intellectual than most of his contemporaries can give, or care, at least, to give. Though the verse in which his plays are generally cast never perhaps rises quite to poetry, he has a certain power of poetical language, and can often express himself naturally and vigorously. But his plays, too, suffer from being obviously written for a particular actor, and *Juanna* suffered especially from being written for an actor unable to deal adequately with the subject. *Charles I.* and *Eugene Aram* were written for Mr. Irving, and pleased because the subjects, as the author presented them, were precisely such as the actor was competent to deal with. But *Juanna* and Madame Modjeska did not combine so happily. The play itself was of so gloomy and morose complexion that under no conditions would it probably have taken a very strong or enduring hold of the public fancy; still, an actress of commanding style, of commanding personality, might, no doubt, have produced some, if only a passing effect, with it. But Madame Modjeska is not such an actress. She is in many ways a well-practised and a pleasing actress, graceful, sentimental, with

a pretty manner of dealing with the lighter phrases of our nature, whether in joy or sorrow. But she is not a tragedian. Through the inadequacy of the actress, therefore, the attention was more directly turned upon the play, and its radical defects grew clear even to such superficial observers as mostly sit in our theatres. So few now care, so few, perhaps, are able to separate the play from the actor, that the two have really become almost synonymous terms; and when we speak of a good play to be seen at this theatre or that, in nine cases out of ten we mean no more than that certain actors have interested us in certain characters. The play-wrights who do their work to order, much as the stage-carpenter and the dressmaker do theirs, are, as a rule, tolerably skilful at their work, or skilful enough, at any rate, to enable the actor to override by his personality their own defects. But in the play *Juanna* it was not so, fortunately for our theatres, unfortunately for Madame Modjeska, who is by no means the worst of offenders in this respect. The personality which the author had been instructed to bring into eminence was not strong enough to bear the dignity; hence *Juanna* was pronounced an ineffectual play, and disappeared accordingly.

Mr. Gilbert, who is the only other of our play-wrights who soars so high, has, since the comparative failure of his *Gretchen*, bent his wings to a

lower flight. With the exception of *Patience*—in the great success of which he has, of course, but a partial share, and on which, together with the rest of its class, I cannot venture any opinion—he has produced this year but one piece, *Fogerty's Fairy*, originally accepted by Sothorn, but first acted a short while ago, and only for a short while, by Mr. Wyndham and his company at the Criterion Theatre. But another piece of his, of much the same order, *Engaged*, has recently been revived at the Court Theatre, with a much greater share of success than was its early lot at the Haymarket. Both these pieces may be said to show Mr. Gilbert at his best, and at his worst. They show the careful elaboration of the idea which distinguishes all his work, and they show, too, the radical ineffectualness of the idea which disfigures so much of it. Many of his critics urge against him his cynicism and his satire, and talk of bitter tastes, unwholesome impressions, and so forth. But, really, this has so little to do with the question. No doubt Mr. Gilbert has a keen eye for 'folly as it flies,' but there is a good deal of folly flying about, and it is as well that some of it should be occasionally brought down. The grotesque is the rock on which he splits; his incurable love for the grotesque, and his inability to see that the essence of the grotesque, as of wit, is brevity; his inability, also, to recognise that those whose minds have not the same ply are

naturally less quick in detecting, less interested in appreciating, the peculiar humours of a form of writing, which really, after all, takes its stand upon the assertion that two and two do not make four. And there is yet more than this. There is something abnormal, something, if I may venture on the expression, almost unhealthy in his attachment. In season and out of season he woos his mistress, in every company, and every circumstance; like old Dinant in the play, he calls on all the world to admire the most secret beauties of his Clarinda. Among the characters he creates, Mr. Gilbert loves to play the part of Comus. The rabble who drank of the enchanted cup and became slaves to the son of Circe were doomed, while retaining their human shapes, to bear upon their shoulders the 'inglorious likeness of a beast.' Somewhat after this fashion has Mr. Gilbert so often deformed even his most serious work with sudden strokes of the grotesque as inexplicable as they are unpleasing. It is difficult to account for this unfortunate whim. His own talents, of which he has given such copious proofs, and his experience of the stage which is undeniable, might alike have told him how fatal such a method of work must be to art, whatever justification he may find for it in nature.

‘ Who would not laugh, if Lawrence hired to grace
His costly canvas with each flattered face,

Abused his art, till Nature with a blush,
Saw cits grow centaurs underneath his brush ;
Or, should some limner join, for show or sale,
A maid of honour to a mermaid's tail ?

Even at its best the grotesque effects only by surprising, and it is not in human nature to go on being surprised at the same thing for ever. 'It was always,' says Falstaff, 'the trick of our English nation if they had a good thing, to make it too common !' Mr. Gilbert found a good thing in his *Bab Ballads* and his *Trial by Jury*, but he has made it too common. They were short, sharp, pithy ; above all, they were fresh ; we were surprised, and allowed no leisure to reflect at what. But when the same idea is repeated in play after play, and trailed across three acts or four, then we cannot but begin to ask ourselves what it is we have come out to see, cannot but discover how slight a thing it really is, how vaporous and fleeting. It is the radical weakness of his subject-matter, its want of solidity, above all its want of humanity, that stands in Mr. Gilbert's way, for all his careful workmanship, and his clear acceptance of that essential fact, that the players are for the play, and not the play for the players. Hence it is that even his most successful work has so little power of endurance. It runs its course, and passes away ; for all its cleverness and humour, for all its play of wit, and riot

of fancy, it passes away. It has not humanity enough to keep it sweet.

Mr. Pinero, a name but little known twelve months ago, has written three plays within that time, all of which proved successful, though the best of all, through accident, proved least so. I will not now inquire how much of this success is his own, and how much belongs to others. And, indeed, the subject—which is one, perhaps, rather of particular than of general interest—has already been so copiously discussed, that there really seems no more to say, save to press again the necessity, so long acknowledged, so long neglected, for a law, similar to that which rules in France, to guard all writers of fiction from any surreptitious reaping of their fruits. Of these three plays, *The Money Spinner*, *Imprudence*, *The Squire*, the first was by far the best. For symmetry and compactness, a clear evolution of plot, and a proper balance of parts, it was certainly the most remarkable of recent contributions to our theatre. And though such a character as the Baron Croodle would, no doubt, lose a little of its force and humorousness if deprived of the felicitous personality of Mr. Hare; and though the general fitness of the representation, of course, counted for much; yet the piece had a freshness and vitality of its own which raised it, for the time at least, far above its contemporaries. Whether the curious subversion of sympathy, which also, and

so strongly marked it, would keep it from a lasting place in our stage literature is a question one can hardly yet answer. Yet certainly the play could be acted by any skilful company of actors, and of how many modern plays could this be said? It could not, I think, be said, for example, of *The Squire*, which bears manifest signs of having been written for the St. James's Theatre, one may say, indeed, for Mr. and Mrs. Kendal. Though the inscrutable fates which rule our theatre seem to have allotted to this a longer lease of life than they allowed its predecessor, it cannot take equal rank as a play. Cleverly written, as it in great part is, and cleverly acted; stronger and more sympathetic as is the interest; yet as a finished and coherent piece of work *The Squire* is certainly inferior to *The Money Spinner*. *Imprudence* the third play, though second in point of time, sank down to the level of those light and frivolous works our fathers knew as farces, but which our politer age dignifies by the style of farcical comedies; and from these it was separated only by the superior freshness and substance of its materials. All these three plays show Mr. Pinero to have a tolerably sound idea of what stage-work should be, and a certain power of perfecting that idea. But if he would continue the promise he has given, he must steer clear of the rock on which so many of his contemporaries,

‘Older in practice, abler than himself
To make conditions,’

have gone down, and keep always in his mind this truth, that it is the true business of the dramatist to write for the *stage* and not for the *actor*. Nearly half a century ago an accomplished critic considered one of the main causes of the decline of the drama—then, as now, a frequent subject of complaint, as it ever has been in every country where it has risen to any great height—to lie in the subordination of the author to the actor. ‘With our simpler actors,’ he says, ‘the play was everything; but now the public go not to hear the author, but to see the actor.’ He has no inclination to decry the importance of the latter, nor to undervalue the measure of such genius as has from time to time illumined his profession. But, without reserve or hesitation, he assigns him his place below the author, below the true creator, without whom he cannot exist. Those positions have been reversed, and the drama has suffered. ‘So long,’ he continues, ‘as the author is sunk to a subordinate station in the general ‘corps dramatique,’ second even to the mechanist and scene painter, as well as to the actor—so long as even a really good play feebly or inadequately performed would have no chance of success—so long the drama will remain far below the poetic average of the elder period.’ It is easy, of course, to push this theory to extremes; it is

easy, too, to answer that a return to the poetic average of the elder period is not to be desired. But that the theory is in itself a sound one the slightest reflection will surely show. When an author begins to be considered chiefly for his ability to furnish an actor with a good part—a part calculated to bring into particular prominence those points of excellence for which the actor is distinguished, an ability which he must be content to share with the wig-maker and the tailor—it is not difficult to understand the decline of dramatic writing. Like the Court painter or the Court poet, when such personages existed, the author is liable ‘to be sent for’ at any moment. He can choose neither his subject nor his mode of treatment, unless, indeed, his choice may happen to jump with his employer’s. He must build only on the lines laid down for him. The actor is peculiarly skilful in the expression of pathos or of passion; apt at provoking laughter or inspiring horror; he has a face, or a figure, a style of speech, or a bearing specially adapted to one type of character. To bring these qualities prominently forward is the author’s duty. Unfortunately, the easiest way of performing this duty is to neglect every other; to take care that there shall be no other object in the work which can distract the attention from the principal figure. In the level waste of the desert every molehill is a mountain, and every shrub a forest tree. While this taste

continues to be acknowledged and encouraged, single specimens of clever acting we may often see, as we do often see; but a really good play will be rare indeed. There may possibly be authors capable of producing such a work, but the opportunities for its production will be, and cannot but be, few, and he who is content to ignore, or cannot recognise this fact, however brilliant his vogue, however solid his gains, can live only by and through the actor whom he serves, and with him he will cease.

Here practically ends the list of serious and native work, unless, indeed, one may place therein *The Colonel*, of Mr. Burnand, whose attractiveness the custom of a twelvemonth has been apparently unable to stale. Though working with French material, in itself not new to our theatre, Mr. Burnand so skilfully changed the direction of the satire, that the original design may, in his hands, be said to have taken fresh shape and complexion. The notion of the piece was to expose religious hypocrisy; Mr. Burnand has employed it, as every one knows, to ridicule what, ruthlessly degrading a noble word, we are accustomed to speak of as 'æstheticism.' His play has certainly been very successful, to which Mr. Coghlan's finished style of acting a character which in English hands is commonly merged in indistinguishable caricature, has greatly contributed. But the mistake Mr. Burnand has made,

and all who have preceded or followed him have made, is that he has not sufficiently distinguished between the false and the true—just as our vague use of the word æstheticism does not sufficiently distinguish between the true and single striving after light, and the ignoble vanity of a few foolish people. Whenever a nation first feels the stir and touch of a new life, whether in politics, or religion, or art, or literature, certain follies and extravagances will inevitably go along with, and for a time impede, the movement; especially will they do so in a nation like ours, with no recognized standard, no accepted rule of right and wrong in such matters. But if there be any real vitality in the movement, these parasites will in time decay and drop off, and then, freed from these retarding influences, the true growth will spread and ripen, and its power will be felt and understood. The satirist, if he would be anything more than a general mocker, should make this distinction; for he who ‘runs a muck at all he meets’ is not truly a satirist, but something other, and less. And it is the want of this distinction which a little destroys the effect of Mr. Burnand’s work, both on and off the stage, and of others who have worked in the same direction; has helped to give it, indeed, an effect contrary to the design, for the effect has mainly been, that the ridiculous affectations they have desired to lash have assumed so much strength and significance

—affectations which without them would long ago have died, as even with them they are now dying. Satirists, to be effective, must always distinguish between the vices or follies which grow out of the life of a nation, and those which grown out of the vanity and idleness of a coterie. The objects of Mr. Burnand's satire have no solid ideas or aim; their desire is only to do and say what they think has never been done or said before. 'Every coterie,' an acute critic has remarked, 'is the product of *ennui*, and by *ennui* it will be ultimately destroyed.'

Over the various adaptations from the French—somewhat fewer happily they have been than usual—and all the light and fleeting work of the hour—fârces, farcical comedies, burlesques, melodramas (which have now rather taken the form of panoramas), and so forth, I need not linger. It plays its part well enough, no doubt, and in some of it there is no lack of cleverness—in satisfying a popular if somewhat empty taste, at least, if in nothing else. But it is hardly work of a kind from which one may derive much hopeful or sustaining augury for the future. One may pass it by then, saying, in Shakespeare's words, 'it is not much, but it will serve,' yet, wishing still that it were more, and might serve some better purpose.

To sum up; certainly from the stand-point of the year's work the prospect of the coming

drama is still, I must confess, to me somewhat obscured ; and, indeed, in the existing conditions of our theatre, I cannot see that there is room for it. For, as I have said, while the actor rules, the dramatist can work but under his hand ; and, on those terms, the drama can never be more than an appanage of the actor. Such satisfaction as the present order of things can truly give must arise from the revival of popular, of national interest in the theatre, and in the number of good actors that our theatres can show. There, it is probable, we have advanced. Actors as great as the greatest that we read of we may hardly think we have ; but the average of the general quality has, one can hardly doubt it, greatly increased. So, when the coming dramatist comes, he should find no lack, so far, of means to work with, and we must all hope that the conditions of his coming will be such—nay, they must be such, as shall give him power to bend these means to his will, not force him to stoop to theirs. And, if it be true, indeed, that the life of the poetical drama has passed away from our stage, that the pressure of our actual life leaves us too little leisure for the proper understanding and enjoyment of the noblest form of poetry—then let him turn his eyes upon that life, upon the life around him and the men who live it ; there, surely, he should find ‘ample room and verge enough’ to trace all characters of human writing. Let him renew

the spirit of the old English comedy, of that comedy which 'with all its imperfections on its head,' could yield at least

'Some fairer trace
Of wit than puns, of humour than grimace.'

THE STAGE AS IT IS.

UNDER this title Mr. Irving delivered, towards the close of last year, an address to the Philosophical Institution of Edinburgh. He had been invited to open the annual session of the Society—a high compliment both to the individual and his profession—and his remarks on so felicitous a subject were naturally anticipated with considerable interest, and heard, we may be sure, with no less. The circumstances of place, subject, and speaker, could not but have given an importance and piquancy to words even less animated than those in which Mr. Irving addressed an audience from whom he had already received so many and such substantial proofs of regard. It would have been hard indeed if, under such very happy and assuring conditions, he had not felt to their full all those stimulating influences with which a cordial and sympathetic audience can inspire even the least practised speaker. And that he did feel them is clearly shown by the

freedom and fertility of his speech, its buoyancy and unreservedness, even by the little touches, here and there, of what one may be permitted without offence to call self-sufficiency, in the circumstances so very natural. But, in those same circumstances, it was almost inevitable that he should sometimes forget that he was necessarily regarding from one point of view only a subject, not perhaps of that world-wide importance that he appears to attach to it, but certainly of no little interest. He, an actor, was expatiating to his audience on the great worth and influence of the theatre as an elevating factor in the sum of human civilization. He held the field alone and unopposed, and he held it, no doubt, in triumphant style. But there is, of course, another point of view from which the subject must also be regarded, if there is to be any seriousness, any fixed purpose in our regard—the point necessarily taken by the public, by that intelligent and impartial section of the public, without whose humanising and co-operating influence the theatre can never be, I will not say all that Mr. Irving claims for it, for that I fear no poor sublunar institution may ever hope to be—but can never be, let me say, more than the idle amusement of the hour, more or less unrefined as the circumstances of the hour may determine. And it may perhaps be found neither uninteresting nor unfruitful to consider a little, what proportion these

two views bear to each other, wherein they differ (if any difference there may be), and how those differences may be reconciled. An actor is so often condemned to bear in silence from others unformed or intemperate criticism, that of all men he is entitled to a full and careful hearing, when he comes forward in his turn to play the critic.

It had been well, let me say at the outset, for many reasons, if Mr. Irving had not indulged in quite so copious an *apologia pro arte sua*. For, true as it may be, the assertion with which he starts—‘no apology for the stage; none is needed; it has but to be named to be honoured’—cannot but seem to some minds a little discounted by the elaborate insistence with which he straightway proceeds to press this fact. And really it is all so much beside the question. No doubt the state of unrivalled happiness and splendour in which, as we are told, our actors now habitually move, is very gratifying to them; and, if it can be shown to have a salutary influence on their art, very gratifying to us, the public, who are not concerned with them, but with their art. As Mr. Irving has with admirable good sense observed, theatrical enterprise *must be carried on as a business, or it will fail as an art*; and the essential conditions of its success as an art are, that its followers should know their business as artists. It is primarily a simple question of demand and supply. The

public require, and are willing to pay liberally for good acting, or for such acting, at least, as may at the time satisfy that many-sided and somewhat curious quality known as the public taste. If our actors can supply this it is no more a public concern on whose visiting-lists their names may appear, than it is what church they may frequent, or what may be their opinion on the historical value of the books of Moses. There will always, of course, be certain foolish persons who, to gratify their own vanity, will attach themselves to the train of a popular actor, as of any other individual who may happen for his hour to take the public eye. Mr. Irving has congratulated the world in general on the fact that the ranks of the theatrical profession are being now so copiously recruited with young men, well-educated, seriously interested, and of good connections. To be well-educated and seriously interested is indeed of great virtue to any young man, whatever his business or breeding may be; but the *good connections*, what have they to do with it? Alas! not all the blood of all the Howards will make a good actor out of a bad one; and of how small avail is it to us, after some painful display of incompetency, to learn that the offender is remotely connected with some offshoot of the Peerage, or has even had the honour of an introduction to Royalty? Sweeteners of life, no doubt, these privileges are, and to be despised by none, but as handmaids of art perhaps

of somewhat less direct and salutary influence. No; if the clear and serious current of interest, which has now begun to set once more towards the theatre, is to endure, it must be understood and accepted, that what the theatre needs is not fine ladies and gentlemen, but good actors and actresses. Let us have them first, and let the others follow, hereafter as may be. There seems rather a disposition in certain quarters to ignore this very obvious and vital truth; and this must be my apology for inflicting on my readers so many words upon a matter in itself of so little grace, and even less worth. Welcome, to borrow Mr. Irving's words, welcome, indeed, be the return of good sense and good taste! but their return to our stage will never be quite accomplished till all such ignoble springs of triumph are closed for ever.

But let us turn to the other and less personal part of Mr. Irving's address. For here it is, of course, that the real interest centres; here it is, when he leaves the individual, and turns to the stage itself—to the stage, not as a vantage-ground for private ambition or display, but as a source of intellectual and refreshing pleasure to the world—it is here that his words are really worth considering, even when least in harmony with the judgment and experience of others.

He starts with the reasons for his choice of subject, the stage *as it is*,

‘Because it is very cheap and empty honour
‘that is paid to the drama in the abstract, and
‘withheld from the theatre-as a working institu-
‘tion in our midst. Fortunately there is less of
‘this than there used to be. It arose partly from
‘intellectual superciliousness, partly from timidity
‘as to moral contamination. To boast of being
‘able to appreciate Shakespeare more in reading
‘him than in seeing him acted used to be a common
‘method of affecting special intellectuality. I
‘hope this delusion—a gross and pitiful one as to
‘most of us—has almost absolutely died out. It
‘certainly conferred a very cheap badge of
‘superiority on those who entertained it. It seemed
‘to each of them an inexpensive opportunity of
‘worshipping himself on a pedestal. But what
‘did it amount to? It was little more than a con-
‘ceited and featherhead assumption that an un-
‘prepared reader, whose mind is usually full of far
‘other things, will see on the instant all that has
‘been developed in hundreds of years by the
‘members of a studious and enthusiastic pro-
‘fession.’

This is perhaps a little too much in what our great master of literary manners has termed the *eruptive* style; but, as I have said, it is not every day the actor gets the chance of playing the critic, and, moreover, it is of course very natural that he should be pleased to find reasons why people should come to the theatre instead of

sitting at home. Let all allowances then be made; but even with all allowances, does not Mr. Irving beg his question here a little too boldly? If one could be always sure of seeing Shakespeare's plays well acted—well acted in every part and every scene; if one could always be sure of seeing them, and not other people's versions of them—that were, indeed, a different matter. But this is not so; no one can be more conscious than Mr. Irving himself that it is not so. He must know, his experience both as actor and manager must have taught him only too surely that Shakespeare's plays are not always acted very well. It can be no very gross nor pitiful delusion to think it possible sometimes to appreciate Shakespeare better by reading his work as he wrote it, than by hearing it, other than as he wrote it, mouthed and mangled by a bad actor. No doubt an unprepared reader, with his mind usually full of far other things, will not see on the instant the full truth and power and delicate beauty of Shakespeare; no one, we may fairly suppose, would profess to grasp in a moment of time all that a studious and enthusiastic profession has evolved out of centuries of thought. But the reader who really loves and studies his Shakespeare, in all probability has had—one is inclined to say, indeed, must have had—a certain preparation; his mind is probably to a certain extent familiar with things bearing some affinity to

those of which Shakespeare treats. And so, when we are told to recognise the vast advantages which 'a practised actor; impregnated, by the associations of his life and by study, with all the practical and critical skill of his profession,' must necessarily have over the simple reader, we naturally ask what are those associations? we naturally wish to be assured of that critical skill, before allowing at haphazard that they must necessarily be such as to fit the actor to understand and interpret Shakespeare better than all other sorts and conditions of men. It is difficult to believe that all the associations with which an actor's mind must necessarily in these days be so largely impregnated can have the ennobling and fertilising effect that is here claimed for them. It is difficult not to imagine that his mind, if any mind, must sometimes be full of far other things than thoughts of Shakespeare. The humours of modern comedy, for example, can surely not stand as an entirely good schooling for the humours of Falstaff or Beatrice, nor modern sentiment as an entirely good schooling for the pathos of Lear or Desdemona. Again, all that the actor's study has developed in these hundreds of years does not certainly commend itself to readers, studious also according to their lights, and enthusiastic, after a different fashion. When one finds for example that these centuries of development have ordained that Othello should tear to indistinguishable

tatters the incomparable speech over the body of his murdered wife; when one finds that the soft and dainty Viola should receive the token of Olivia's misplaced love with the coarse appreciation of a Tearsheet; one has but to turn to the book to see how false, how fatally false and ignoble must be the use that can breed such habits; and surely, then, the reader may be pardoned for suspecting that, in such instances at least, he can get from his own study a truer Shakespeare than any the actor who follows custom so slavishly can show him.

It is a common saying that because Shakespeare wrote for the stage, it is foolish to pretend that he *reads* better than he *acts*, to use a theatrical form of speech. That actors should have from time immemorial been strenuous supporters of this *dictum* is most natural; but others than actors have also ranged themselves on the same side. Among the most recent, if we do not mistake his meaning, is Mr. Alfred Austin, in the eloquent eulogy on the dramatic, as the highest and most comprehensive form of poetry, which he has pronounced in the preface to his tragedy of *Savonarola*. But I cannot think this is so, entirely and without any reservation.

For we should remember what that stage was for which Shakespeare wrote, and what the time. The stage of Elizabeth represented all that the circulating libraries, the magazines, the news-

papers of Victoria represent. It was the *literature* of the time and of the people. Yet Shakespeare, as Goethe so shrewdly said, as Lamb said—surely no unjust nor niggard critics of the theatre—was not truly a *theatre-poet*. He wrote for the theatre, because it was the quickest and the surest way of reaching comfort and independence, the quickest and the surest way of getting at the ear of the public. But one has only to *read* his plays to see how at times the theatre passes altogether from his thoughts; the stage is too narrow, then—then, as Goethe said, the whole visible world is too narrow for his great mind. And, by applying the same test, one can no less clearly see how at other times the theatre, despite its freedom from the rules and conventionalities of to-day, did, if not exactly (as Mr. Austin says it did not) cramp his genius and curtail his fancy, certainly a little pervert and degrade them both. One can hardly doubt that, had he been writing otherwise than for the stage, he would have given us rather less of that style of writing which has been justly styled *detestable, though Shakespeare had signed it a thousand times*. I need not, I am sure, quote the well-known lines in the Sonnets in which he has given utterance to his own feelings on this subject.

Yet his plays, such as he wrote them, were acted then without let or hindrance. They cannot be so acted now. It is not the refinement of

speech and manners that stands only in their way. There are so many other obstacles. There is this, for example, to borrow Mr. Irving's own words, that the minds people mostly carry with them now to the theatre are so unprepared, so full of far other things; they have so much to do, so little time to do it in. The hours they can spare for the theatre are so few, and of these hours so much time is wasted in elaborate preparations of scenery, in elaborate changes of costume. Without Quin's high plume and Oldfield's petticoat, Oldfield has still less grace now, and Quin less dignity than in the days of Pope. Take, for example, the play of *Antony and Cleopatra*; there is not much that Shakespeare wrote finer than this, yet in what fashion could this play now be placed upon the stage? In one act alone the scene would have to shift from Syria to Rome, from Rome to Alexandria, from Alexandria to Athens, from Athens back again to Rome, from Rome back again to Egypt, and so on;—what could a manager do here, governed, as of necessity he must be, by the existing passion for profusion and correctness of scenic display? Or, take again, in the same play, the inimitable scene on board Pompey's galley between the tipsy Lepidus and the mocking Antony; take the scene where the clown brings to Cleopatra the 'pretty worm of Nilus;' one cannot but ask oneself what some of our actors 'impregnated with the associations'

of modern comedy might not make of such occasions for their humour. To act *Antony and Cleopatra*, as Shakespeare wrote it, would be impossible now; yet who that reads it ever wishes it the shorter by so much as a single word? So, in *Macbeth*, in that ghastly banqueting scene, may not the reader's imagination possibly figure a more tremendous vision than the stage, painting with visible flesh and blood, can show him? *The Ghost of Banquo enters and sits in Macbeth's place*—may not these simple words call up before the eye of the mind a more vivid counterfeit of that horrible shadow, its gory locks, its soulless orbs, than the visual eye can receive from the palpable reality of the stage? What 'unreal mockery' can there be in the ghost which bears 'in compliment extern,' all the gross and tangible properties of humanity, which must be as obvious to all the banqueters, as, unless the horror of the scene be brought to utter naught, we must understand it was but to the guilty vision of the murderer? And of the play of *Hamlet*, in which Mr. Irving has found his most popular part, if not, perhaps, quite his best. It is surely no very gross delusion to think, that in the quiet of his study, some reader, not unprepared, nor pre-occupied, may, through Shakespeare's own words, more closely track, more clearly comprehend, the shifts and currents of a mind here face to face with Nature, than by casual glimpses through

the haze of the footlights, cramped and vulgarized by the inevitable condition of the theatre.

These are the very common-places of the question, native to the theatre in every age and every circumstance. Let us take another point, more directly applicable to our own day. Whatever else of the actor's art may come by nature, elocution and declamation most certainly do not. They must be *taught* and *learnt*. Now it is on this place, on the lack of these indispensable arts, the very rudiments of their profession, that one lays one's finger as on the fatal defect of our modern actors, with all their many and sterling qualities. Yet without them, without the knowledge of these arts, who shall deliver the verse of Shakespeare? 'Shakespeare'—and the praise, let it be remembered, is the praise of a foreigner, so that an Englishman may quote it with no unbecoming pride—'Shakespeare is not only the king of the realm of thought, he is also the king of poetic rhythm and style. Shakespeare has succeeded in giving us the most varied, the most harmonious verse which has ever sounded upon the human ear since the verse of the Greeks.' Yes, indeed, he has; we may read it as he wrote it all of us, the humblest individual in his study along with the most brilliant *interpreter* that ever trod the boards. But, alas, where is the actor who can catch the note of this divine music, who will fill our ears with the mingled strength, fluidity, and sweetness of

what the same authority has so finely called 'the majestic English iambic.' The stately march of such verse as—

'In the dark backward and abysm of time,'

or—

'This was the noblest Roman of them all.'

The pathos, strong as death and deeper than the grave, that throbs through dying Hamlet's words—

'If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.'

The splendid assurance of glory that rings like a trumpet through that noble prelude to the thunder of Agincourt—

'And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered,
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.'

The delicate loveliness and grace, the incomparable charm of that *natural magic* which is Shakespeare's divinest gift, breathing like its own violets through the melody of that matchless flower-piece—

· Daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty ; violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,
Or Cytherea's breath.'

Nay, and his prose too ; for the prose of Shakespeare is in its kind as various and as perfect to its purpose ; the prose of Shylock and Hamlet, and Duke Vincentio and Iago ; of Benedick and Rosalind and Falstaff. As matters now stand, we must indeed be pardoned for thinking that it is possible to get the real essence of such things, to savour them more finely and completely through the commonplace and colourless medium of a printed text, than in the 'wild and whirling words' that pour, without form and void, from the mouth of the actor, who, whatever the sum of his natural talents may be, has never mastered the first principles of his art—has never learnt *to speak his own language*. And if indeed such knowledge cannot be taught in schools, but must come by practice and experience, in heaven's name let it come quickly, for we have waited for it long.

' Sons of the world, oh, speed those years,
But, while we wait, allow our tears ! '

I am not, to borrow the words of Charles Lamb, who has indeed treated this matter with such truth and thoroughness as to need no second

hand—I am not arguing that Shakespeare's plays should not be acted, but how far *they are made another thing by being acted*. It must in some degree have been so always; it must have been so even in the first youth and freshness of the new England of Elizabeth; in that simpler state of society, when men were but as children with a larger variety of ideas; when they sat in their rude theatres, admiring, wondering, trembling, laughing much, but reasoning little, comparing little, applying no rule of thumb, asking not could this have been, or would not that have happened otherwise. How much more must it be so now?—now, with our minds impregnated with all the philosophy, the science, the critical training, the practical application of three centuries of ever-widening civilization! In the finest workings of the poet there must ever be a grace beyond the reach of the stage. The imagination only can follow him,

‘Sailing with supreme dominion,’

far above the petty confines of that earth to which our bodies—the bodies even of the best actors—must keep. Reduced to the material compass of the theatre, the most ethereal visions, the most delicate graces of his fancy, cannot but lose something of their radiancy, cannot but acquire a certain touch of grossness, of human substance and human infirmity. Yet the creations

of Shakespeare in the hands of a capable actor—an actor who can not only understand the poet, but give his understanding, as I have elsewhere said, proper voice and expression—must always, even in their theatrical form, give the highest and purest pleasure it is in the power of the stage to impart. So far all will go along with Mr. Irving, whose worthiest praise indeed it is that he has done what in him lies to bring back to us this truth after so long a period of intellectual sleep. It is only when we find him indulging in such rhapsodies as these :—‘It is acting chiefly that can open to others, with any spark of Shakespeare’s mind, the means of illuminating the world. *Only the theatre can realise to us in a lifelike way what Shakespeare was to his own time. . . . Shakespeare belongs to the stage for ever, and his glories must always inalienably belong to it*’—it is then that we cannot but ask ourselves whether the speaker does not perhaps protest a little too much; that we cannot but smile to think, remembering his own feelings, what Shakespeare himself would have said to such a form of panegyric; and smiling, perhaps we murmur to ourselves the words of his own Celia—‘O wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful wonderful! and yet again wonderful, and after that, out of all whooping!’ No; let the actor have his pedestal, by all means; of all who labour for the public pleasure none deserve it more; let him

take his place among the Cibbers, the Centlivres, and the Cowleys, the Sheridan Knowles, the Colmans, and the Reynolds, among the spirits who wrote with their eyes ever fixed upon him, and who, without him, have no abiding-place among us. But he must not think to stand beside Shakespeare. The glories of Shakespeare belong not to the stage, but to the world.

Still, as Mr. Irving justly observes, there is only one Shakespeare; and though there are comparatively few dramatists 'sufficiently classic to be read with close attention, there is a great deal of average dramatic work excellently suited for representation.' And again: 'If, because Shakespeare was good reading, people were to give the cold shoulder to the theatre, the world would lose all the vast advantage that comes to it through the dramatic faculty in forms not rising to essentially literary excellence.' Now, here we get into the regions of common-sense. No one, indeed, I should wish to think, gives, or wishes to give, 'the cold shoulder' to the theatre because Shakespeare 'is good reading.' There is, and always probably will be, a sort of minds that regards the theatre with aversion; but this is not, I suspect, the sort that turns to Shakespeare's pages either for its instruction or refreshment. But there certainly is an abundance of work excellently fitted for dramatic representation which no one perhaps would greatly care to read—

Lewis the Eleventh, for example, and the *Corsican Brothers*; there are two plays that Mr. Irving has himself shown us are capable of giving great pleasure in their dramatic form to very many people who would possibly be but little interested in them for their literary qualities, were they ten times greater than they are. In plays of this class, and other plays that live by reason of their dramatic, their *theatrical* faculty, the actor may justly take to himself all the credit of their success. Here he may, with perfect propriety, strive 'to place the author in new lights,' to give the 'personage being played an individuality, partly independent of, and yet consistent with, and rendering more powerfully visible the dramatist's conception.' And it is to his handling of such work, one cannot doubt, that the French critics who first employed the phrase, which Mr. Irving, of course, defends so vigorously, of an actor's 'creating a part,' would prefer to confine it. The poet *creates*; the actor *conceives*. One can perfectly understand the phrase as employed on a Marguerite or a Gilberte, or even a Robert Macaire or a Ruy Blas; but we doubt whether any one endowed with that nice taste and quick perception which is supposed to be the proper heritage of the French critic, would have cared to apply the phrase to a Hamlet or a Lear, a Portia or a Lady Macbeth. The actor who attempts to give to such characters an individuality

of his own, to place their author in a new light, may 'create a part' indeed, but it will not perhaps be quite the part that the poet has himself created.*

Mr. Irving has himself drawn for us the picture of an actor :—

'To efficiency in the art of acting there should come a congregation of fine qualities. There should be considerable, though not necessarily, systematic culture. There should be delicate instincts of taste cultivated, consciously or unconsciously, to a degree of extreme and subtlety. There should be a power at once refined and strong, of both perceiving and expressing to others the significance of language, so that neither shades nor masses of meaning, so to speak, may be either lost or exaggerated. Above all, there should be a sincere and abounding sympathy with

* In the essay to which I have already alluded, Mr. Mathew Arnold has a passage which very happily explains the real sense and limitation of this phrase. 'Great artists like Talma and Rachel, *whose power as actors was far superior to the power as poets of the dramatists whose work they were rendering*, filled out with their own life and warmth the parts into which they threw themselves, gave body to what was meagre, fire to what was cold, and themselves supported the poetry of the French classic drama rather than were supported by it.' And again :—'French acting is so good that there are few pieces, excepting always those of Molière, in the repertory of a company such as that which we have just seen, *where the actors do not show themselves to be superior to the pieces they render, and to be worthy of better.*'

all that is good, and great, and inspiring. That sympathy, most certainly, must be under the control and manipulation of art, but it must be none the less real and generous, and the artist who is a mere artist will stop short of the highest moral effects of his craft.'

With some slight reservations, of no great weight, this is admirably true and well-expressed. But where may we find such actors? Where are we to find them while the man who can speak so wisely at one moment is at another found indulging in such a strain as this:—

'There are some who acknowledge the value of improved *status* to themselves and their art, but who lament there are now no schools for actors. This is a very idle lamentation. Every actor in full employment gets plenty of schooling, for the best schooling is practice, and there is no school so good as a well-conducted playhouse.'

Alas! it is such talking as this, and this, which comes but a little before it, 'the acting of plays has never yet even for a day been divorced from literary taste and skill,' that makes the condition of our stage, with all its prosperity, with all its activity and enterprise, seem to many minds so hopeless of improvement. If our actors are to rest in happy satisfaction on such sayings as these, what chance can they have of ever drawing near even to Mr. Irving's splendid ideal? Who can know better than he that every actor is not

always in full employment? Who can know better that he that every untrained actor cannot leap at a bound into a well-conducted playhouse? * And who has now to pay for such schooling as Mr. Irving advocates, as too many of our young actors only get? What of us, the poor public, the *vile corpus*, on whom these painful experiments in schooling are made? It may be that the time has gone by for the establishment in England of such schools of acting as France can boast, even as the time has gone by for us to think to see in our midst such an institution as the French Academy. On this I will now venture no opinion; this much only will I say, that we have no such schools, and we have a piteously large proportion of ungraced and rudimentary actors. Yet something surely might be done to spare our stage the painful scenes of incapacity and self-sufficiency it is now forced so frequently to exhibit. Or, at least, if nothing can be done, it were surely better to suffer us to regret in silence, than to proclaim in triumph from the house-tops that nothing need be done, that nothing shall be.

Mr. Irving has done much, no doubt; much to gratify an intelligent taste if not yet wholly to satisfy it, much to revive and promote a wider

* When these words were written, the lamentable exhibition of folly and bad taste which has recently attended the appearance of a novice on the public stage, had not taken place. T

and worthier interest in the stage. But yet, how much remains to do ! Even for him, with all his splendid successes, with all his brilliant vogue, how much remains ! Let him remember this, and to help him to remember it, let me presume to offer him a line from that Skakespeare he knows so well, the depths of whose vast mind he has doubtless sounded with a thoroughness to which we others, humble and uninspired readers that we are, can never hope to aspire—

‘ Security
Is mortal’s chiefest enemy.’

AMERICAN PLAYS AND PLAYERS.

I.

MR. BOOTH IN *RICHELIEU*.

(*Princess's Theatre, November 20, 1880.*)

Few who have seen Mr. Booth in *Hamlet* but must have been prepared to find a great improvement in his *Richelieu*. It is not, of course, that the art of the actor has matured, or that he has developed any new or unsuspected qualities; it is that the measure of that art is better fitted to present the one character than the other. Most of the good qualities, as of the bad, that marked his *Hamlet*, may still be found in his *Richelieu*; but the former assume a larger significance from the fact, that the latter, from the nature of the character and the play, retire into comparative unimportance. The mannered style, the studied graces, the set rhetorical speech, all the instances of an art which, if the phrase may be permitted, wears its heart upon its sleeve, and which various critics in various degrees maintain to have dis-

figured the Hamlet of Shakespeare, are found to acquire a certain fitness of their own in the Richelieu of Lord Lytton. Art alone, though polished to the very finger-tips, without at least some tincture of that mysterious and many-sided quality we call genius, could never adequately express such a character as Hamlet—a character, indeed, which must, as Lamb has so finely shown, lose all its mystery and more than half its charm upon the boards of a theatre.

But with Richelieu it is not so. The Cardinal is, indeed, a stately and impressive figure, and the various moods of his character, as the dramatist saw them, are well distinguished and preserved. Picturesque and stirring, the play is indeed an admirable specimen of the work of one whom art had made free of all the lower slopes of Parnassus, but whom Nature forbade to breathe 'the ampler ether and diviner air' that blows over the summit. Despite the effect of many of the scenes, and the vigour of much of the verse, never for one instant is the spectator taken out of the theatre. The staunchest adherent to Johnson's half-contemptuous saying, that 'the stage is only a stage and the players are only players,' still probably preserves in his memory some recollection of a time when his theory was shaken, or, as he might prefer to say, received that strongest confirmation which the one exception is supposed to give. But no such confirmation was ever

drawn from the play of *Richelieu*. From the first act to the last we breathe the atmosphere of the theatre ; we live only in a world of puppets.

It is in such plays as these then—in plays pre-eminently, and above all else, *of the theatre, theatrical*—that the well-graced and well-practised actor will ever be in his element, and here, in this play of *Richelieu*, in his element most assuredly is Mr. Booth. It is no slight to his intelligence to assume that he understands the character of Richelieu more completely than he understands the character of Hamlet ; it is no slight to his theatrical skill to say that he plays it better *because* he understands it better. He is, I should be inclined to say, much as an actor what Lord Lytton was as a dramatist ; the forces at his disposal are not numerous, nor do they include, perhaps, every arm of the theatric service, but such as they are he disposes and manœuvres them with the ability of a consummate general. And here, in *Richelieu*, he can suit the action to the word, because he knows precisely what the latter means, and it never means more than he is able to embody. His presence is admirable, whether in the loose undress of his own palace, or in the full and flowing robes in which he comes before the King. His cunning is precisely the cunning of a brave man, whose experience of those dark and treacherous times had taught him that the open bravery of the soldier was no match

single-handed for the craft of the courtier ; yet of a brave man who, in his own words, used the fox's skin only when the lion's had been proved too short. Both in his tenderness to Julie, and in his banter with De Mauprat and with Joseph, there is the proper tincture of dignity which befits one of his high estate. In the fine scenes which close the fourth act he did not altogether avoid the snare which has entrapped every actor whom I have ever seen in the part, and here the effect certainly would have been greater had there been something more of substance, something less of sound. Yet he was less completely entrapped by it than have been most of his predecessors. He lost control neither of his voice nor of his actions ; he became neither undignified nor obscure. One might have preferred the impression produced in a different way, but some impression certainly there was, and, perhaps, as near the right one as we are likely to get from our actors so long as we are content to go to our theatres like Pyramus, but to see a noise. Those affectations of speech, or imperfections as it would be more just to call them, which so disagreeably impressed some of his hearers in *Hamlet* had not wholly vanished from *Richelieu* ; but they naturally fell less harshly upon ears listening to language from its own quality less susceptible to such attacks, than are the large and noble utterances of Shakespeare. And after

all, have not Englishmen now rather lost the right to visit on a foreigner the sins they appear so eager to applaud in a countryman? But to sum up; how far this presentation may resemble the Great Cardinal himself, the Richelieu of France, is a question that need trouble neither Mr. Booth nor any of his critics: of the Richelieu of the English play it is, beyond doubt, a correct, spirited, and dignified picture.

It is much to be regretted, for Mr. Booth's sake, no less than for the credit of our theatre, that the play could not have been better cast. Miss Gerard looked so fair a Julie, and Mr. Leathes so picturesque a king, that they may be exempted from the general proscription, while Mr. Swinburne's Baradas must also be set on one side, for the reason that, through the illness of the actor who should have played the part, it may be supposed to have been but the issue of the moment. But the general effect was poor indeed. To be sure there was Mr. Ryder to play Joseph, and Mr. Ryder's long experience of the stage and his practised method will always, in these careless days of hit or miss, give to every part he plays a certain distinction. But he brought to the character, as indeed all actors seem agreed to bring, a solemn air of buffoonery, a sort of tremendous, of elephantine, playfulness, that I cannot think belongs to it. There is, indeed, or, at least, the author seems anxious

that there should be, some element of humour in the scenes between him and his great master, which may possibly be characteristic of their private relations; but the humour was probably more on the side of Richelieu than Joseph. De Mauprat, however, stood forth pre-eminent as the weak point of the play, De Mauprat who, after Richelieu, should be the strongest; yet in one respect he may be said to have acted up to the spirit of his part, for, indeed, to use his own words,

‘ there was a voice within his soul
Whose cry could drown the thunder.’

II.

MR. McCULLOUGH IN *VIRGINIUS*.

(*Drury Lane Theatre, April, 1881.*)

A modern audience will perhaps not care to go along with Hazlitt in all his remarks on Sheridan Knowles' *Virginus*. Still, when allowance has been made for the critic's generous enthusiasm in the cause of 'an old and early friend, unaltered in sentiment or unspoiled by success'—when it has been made also for a desire to abase certain enemies as well as to exalt a friend, there is

really not so very much in the general estimate at which one is disposed to cavil. One may not feel indeed quite sure that it is a 'sound historical painting' (as one saw it, at least, at Drury Lane), but certainly it is a good play—a good *theatre-play*, and a real tragedy. As a whole, it is powerful and affecting; with Charles Kemble's Icilius and Miss Foote's Virginia to help Macready's Virginius, one can imagine it might have been very powerful and affecting. What Hazlitt says of the language is particularly true. The author has not tried, or, at least, has very rarely tried, to 'strike his lofty head against the stars;' and he has refrained very wisely, for from the few attempts he has apparently made, it does not seem as though he would have got very near the stars. But at his best he can be both vigorous and natural, and his language generally helps on the scene, seems to arise out of it, as it were, to be made for it, and not to be the prime end and object of the play. He may be said to have been the last of our playwrights who regarded the whole instead of the parts, the essential difference between the ancient theory of the drama and the modern, and the essential superiority of the former. Moreover, as Hazlitt very justly observes, *Virginius*, besides its merits as a literary composition—which, though he rates them, let it be allowed, a little higher than they deserve, are really not such as we at least can afford to laugh

at—has the merit of being excellently fitted for the stage, of being, in short, an excellent *theatre-play*, which is not at all the same thing as a good drama, as so many of us, authors, actors, critics, are apt to forget, for ever taking as one those two essentially different qualities, the *dramatic* and the *theatric*. It not only presents a succession of striking pictures, of animated and effective scenes, but these scenes cohere, these pictures follow each other in a natural sequence; each part bears its proper place in the whole, and contributes its fair share to it; the fable moves by gradual and regular progress to its end; and we see the movement, we do not learn of it at second-hand. If we run over in our minds the few essays in the poetical drama that our present age has seen—Mr. Tennyson's two plays, *The Cup* and *The Falcon*, Mr. Wills' *Eugene Aram*, Mr. Merivale's *White Pilgrim*, Mr. Gilbert's *Broken Hearts*, and so forth, I really do not know where we shall find the superior of *Virginius* in these qualities at least, whichever way the balance of poetical value may lean.

For the historical paintings, as reproduced at Drury Lane, again one must be permitted to be a little doubtful. 'Tis the taste of the ancients, 'tis classical lore,' quotes Hazlitt; but one hardly perhaps, feels inclined to allow this without reservations now, whatever it may have been in Hazlitt's time. The taste of the ancients very

possibly, but there were ancients and ancients; ancients of the Commonwealth, and ancients of the later Empire. The classical lore of Drury Lane is no doubt in itself correct enough, and certainly very picturesque; but it belongs, one cannot but think, rather to the latter than the former time. What, for example, does an Egyptian obelisk in the forum of the Decemvirs? Again, the houses of men in the position of Virginius, men of the middle, or, at most, the upper middle classes, were surely not quite so stately and luxurious in the time of the great struggle between the Patricians and the Plebeians, some four hundred and fifty years before Christ, that is to say, as they were fifty or a hundred years after. It is dangerous work meddling with archæological matters, but it looks certainly as though the classical lore of Drury Lane had produced the taste of later Pompeii rather than of early Rome. All this, however, really matters so very little; and for my own part, so long as the play were well played, I should not be disposed to cry out very loudly, if the Great Pyramid itself were set up in the Forum, or Virginius to stab his daughter on the steps of St. Peter's.

Mr. McCullough's Virginius was, on the whole, a powerful, if not a satisfying performance. His appearance is manly and impressive; his voice, where he does not strain it too far, despite a somewhat mixed accent, is clear and full; his

gestures often singularly natural and striking. His best scenes were with his daughter, and after his daughter's death, when his reason has momentarily given way. The meeting of the two in the house of Numitorius, whither the father had been summoned from the camp by the news of the Decemvir's insult, was very natural and pleasing; the girl's sense of safety in her father's presence, and his gentle, reassuring manner to her, alternating with gusts of fury against her insulter, and a haunting fear of the future, were all very well expressed; his delivery of the well-known passage—

‘I never saw you look so like your mother
In all my life,’

was particularly touching. Nor need anything have been better than his manner before Appius; his petulant rejection of the cautious pleading of old Numitorius, ‘To be sure she will—a most wise question this;’ his scornful promise to Claudius (the ‘varlet Marcus’ of Macaulay’s lay), ‘Look at me, and I will give her to thee.’ In all these scenes—save for the matter of accent, which is after all, perhaps, but an insular prejudice—a better Virginius than McCullough no one could have desired. To be sure, these scenes are so skilfully contrived for theatric effect—‘play themselves so well,’ as the cant phrase goes—that the actor who should fail altogether to please in them

must have indeed quite a curious facility of failure; but this, I need not say, makes Mr. McCullough's success in them not a whit less certain or complete. Perhaps the highest point he touched was in his scene with Appius in the dungeon, where, forgetful, in his madness, of the tragedy in the market-place, he insists the girl must be with the tyrant, for—

‘What

But such a wonder of rich beauty could
Deck out a dungeon so as to despoil
A palace of its tenant?’

Here the actor was really powerful, and impressive, and the impression was greatly helped by Mr. Barnes' bearing, in which fear and a certain feeling of pity were very well shown. But it was in the longer speeches, in the more impassioned passages, that Mr. McCullough was less satisfying, failed, indeed, as every actor must in these days fail, when the art of speaking is a lost art. Here his manner became laboured; his action sometimes unduly florid, sometimes even travelled away from the significance of the text; his speech here and there a song almost, one may say, without words, and a song somewhat harsh and unmusical. It was, indeed, a curious comment upon the strange negligence shown by so many otherwise intelligent actors in cultivating what must surely be one of the actor's greatest gifts, a fine voice, that Mr. McCullough, at times

audible, one might have thought, even in the Strand, became at others inaudible almost in the stalls. But regarding the performance generally, recalling it afterwards as a whole, it left a sense of power and intelligence, not always very highly tutored, at times a little too violent, too extravagant for real greatness, but on the whole weighty and striking.

To Mr. Barnes' share in the performance I have already briefly alluded. His Appius was a bold and spirited piece of acting; somewhat too gay, perhaps, too much of the popular man in his bearing to the crowd; the manner rather, as one might fancy, of Appius the grandson, than of the Appius who stands in Roman history beside Sextus Tarquinius. Mr. Barnes has a fine voice, and knows how to use it better than do most of his contemporaries; a gallant bearing, and knows how to make the best of it. Some of his attitudes and movements were very effective; his spring from the tribunal, for example, to protect his client from the fury of the mob; his start back from the door when the maddened father bursts into his dungeon; his oath,—‘By the gods, Virginius, your daughter is not in my keeping.’ Miss Cowell, too, must be praised for her Virginia, which was simple, girlish, unaffected, and could not well have been much more. Hazlitt praises Miss Foote for ‘the delightful little bit of the English schoolgirl’ she threw into the

part. But it is not easy to see how this element can mix with the Virginia of the play; she is hardly Macaulay's Virginia,

‘ With her small tablets in her hand, and her satchel on her arm.’

Unhappily after these two it is not possible to say much for the company provided for Mr. McCullough. Plays of this class have been so long out of date that one is hardly disposed to make it a great grievance that most of the players smacked rather of the streets of London than the Forum of Rome. But the young Icilius—really for the young Icilius one almost felt that a national apology was due to our American visitors. One might smile perhaps at the ‘ varlet Marcus,’ might stare at Servia, yawn at Dentatus, yet the play went on. But Icilius is an important personage, the young gallant, the lover of the play! Charles Kemble first played the part, and was, says Hazlitt, ‘ heroic, spirited, fervid, to the life the Roman warrior and lover.’ But this Icilius is no one of these things; rather, indeed, might it be said that he is precisely the reverse of every one of these things. One remembers Byron’s apostrophe—‘ Gods, o’er *these* boards!’—though, to be sure, since the days of Garrick and Kemble, many degrees of bad actors have trod the boards of Drury Lane. An indifferent actor more or less in a play like *The World* matters nothing; but in a play like *Vir-*

ginius, and in a part like *Icilius*, it matters a great deal. It was due to the public, no less than to Mr. McCullough, that a better representation of this character should have been found; a *better* one it could not have been hard to find.

III.

MR McCULLOUGH IN *OTHELLO*.

(*Drury Lane Theatre, May, 1831.*)

The Greeks had a saying, Δὶς ἢ τρὶς τὰ καλά. 'Give us a fine thing two or three times over,' which seems at first, perhaps, in direct antagonism to our familiar assertion that it is possible to have too much of a good thing, but on reflection will appear rather to have grown out of it, and practically to corroborate it. The fine things of the Greeks which they were content to see over and over again, and seeing which they wanted nothing more, were very fine indeed; ours are not always quite so fine, and even where they are as fine as mortal man need wish, we so often contrive, in some way or other, to mar them in the giving. There is the play of *Othello*, for example; nothing, surely, could well be much finer than this—though a Greek, no doubt, would have stared a little at its 'mixed and turbid grandeur,' and would certainly have looked in

vain for 'the pure lines of an Ionian horizon, the liquid clearness of an Ionian sky.' But still, despite these inevitable shortcomings, it is certainly fine enough to have two or three times over; but then, to use the words of a once popular song, 'So very much depends upon the style in which it's done.' Of Shakespeare's *Othello* it is not possible to have too much; but of the *Othello* of our theatres the impossibility is not quite so certain. We have had a good deal of *Othello* lately; I will not say we have had too much of it, but certainly we have had a good deal of it. We have had it at the Lyceum twice, and, on the whole, perhaps as good as we are likely to get it, for the present, at least, in our theatres. Then we had it at the Gaiety—a curious association of ideas, *Othello* at the Gaiety. Nevertheless there were some good points even about this *Othello*. There was Mr. Brooke's Iago, for instance, and about that there were certainly some good points. Lastly, we have *Othello* at Drury Lane, with Mr. McCullough as the Moor, and Mr. Vezin as Iago.

About Mr. McCullough's *Virginius* there was much that was good; as a whole it was interesting and impressive, and there were passages of real artistic feeling and value. But about Mr. McCullough's *Othello* there is not quite so much that is good. To be sure, there is all the difference in the world between *Othello* and

Virginius, between Shakespeare and Sheridan Knowles. It is the latter that suits Mr. McCullough best. In his hands the Moor becomes rather a common person, rather too fierce and noisy. Othello must, as I have elsewhere said, be dignified, majestic, calm; calm he must be, at first, that when his trained and studied calmness is overthrown, the torrent and tempest of his passion may impress us with its full, its tremendous significance.

‘Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it
Without a prompter.’

That is Othello; his fingers are not always itching for the sword-hilt. Dignified, too, he must be; dignified and temperate, and great; a man of soul as well as of body; he is not a creature of mere physical passion, he is the *noble* Moor, as well as the valiant. Above all, he must be never fierce, and never noisy. The moment sound passes into noise, then we get ranting; then we are stunned, not impressed. To rant is not, as appears to be so commonly thought in these days, merely to lift the voice above the colloquial tone so dear to modern ears, to assume a bearing above the languid airs and graces of the modern stage. To be loud only is not to rant; but the loudness must *come from* the heart as well as the lungs; it must *reach* our heart as well as our ears. After all, where can we get a better definition than

Shakespeare has given us? Many thousands of times as it has been repeated since Shakespeare first wrote it down, this surely is one of the fine things we may have many times over; *sound and fury signifying nothing*—there we have ranting! In such respects then Mr. McCullough's Othello seems to me to be deficient in true greatness, to fail in really satisfying, in convincing. Yet it was a very popular Othello in the place where it was shown, in Drury Lane Theatre; was abundantly, even tumultuously applauded—but so, too, was *The World*; so, too, was the young Icilius of Mr. Augustus Harris, which we all saw the other day.

Mr. Vezin's Iago has, it seems to me, improved greatly with time; it has gained in colour and warmth, become more easy and assured; yet it never degenerates into familiarity, never grows vulgar. Drury Lane Theatre is, indeed, somewhat of a large arena for Mr. Vezin; yet how much more clearly, more incisively his utterances fell upon the ear than the voluminous sounds of Othello! Mr. Barnes is a good actor, high-spirited and gallant; yet he failed to give his Cassio quite the proper air of distinction. 'My reputation, Iago, my reputation!'—one felt somehow as though this Cassio would have been likely to agree with Iago, that there was, after all, more offence in a bodily wound, than in a mere momentary loss of reputation.

IV.

MR. JEFFERSON IN FARCE.

(Haymarket Theatre, June, 1877.)

It would have been a thousand pities had Mr. Jefferson been prevented from fulfilling his engagement at this house, for not only should we have lost a very considerable pleasure, but our actors would have lost the opportunity of learning a most useful lesson. Mr. Jefferson's acting of farce is of a very admirable and perfect kind, as perfect, indeed, in its degree, as is his more familiar and, of course, more valuable acting in *Rip Van Winkle*. His style has been objected to—objected to mostly by his brothers of the English stage, to whom perhaps it is *too* unknown to be magnificent—as too quiet; somewhat lacking in 'point,' in 'life,' or 'go,' to use the vulgar phrase; not 'vivacious' enough, not 'rattling' enough, and so forth. One is loath, of course, to disagree with critics of their own profession, but these objections appear to me to be founded on a popular but erroneous estimate of these qualities. As mere animal spirits and practical joking are sometimes taken as indications of a ready wit and a keen appreciation of humour, so by some would it seem to be considered that there can be no proper acting of farce without noise and bustle, extravagance of voice, gesture, and action, without, in short, all the tumultuous nonsense and incon-

sequence of pantomime. To be here, there, and everywhere on the stage at once; to gabble out one's words so that they tumble over one another's heels as featly as the actor tumbles over the chairs and tables; to be for ever slapping somebody on the back, or nudging somebody in the ribs—such are the elements that would appear in the popular judgment to constitute the peculiar quality of 'go.' In a quality so constituted, let it be said at once, Mr. Jefferson is totally deficient. His speech is brisk and fluent, yet every word tells as distinct as the measured syllables of Sir Oracle. He is easy, quiet, and natural, so far as an actor should be, and no further. Ease and naturalness are, on the stage, but too often synonyms only for flatness and insipidity; but Mr. Jefferson's style is as far removed from the flat and insipid as it is from the noisy and blustering. His voice, his face, every gesture, every movement, is brimful of fun; a glance of his eye is worth a hundred jokes. When Mr. Golightly discovers in the pocket of that 'shocking bad' coat, which some dishonest guest has substituted for his own brand new 'Raglan,' that face is the very essence of comicality, and the jaunty air with which he turns on his heel with a 'Jack's alive again' is inimitable. Above all let it be noted how rigorously Mr. Jefferson eschews that 'pestilent heresy' known on the stage, and a great deal too much talked about it off it, as 'making his points.'

Mr. Jefferson does not go to his 'points,' they come to him. They are not forced into prominence, but arise easily, and so all the more prominently, from the natural sequence of words and actions presented with their proper effect by the actor. It has been often said, that the best mission of the stage, the only true mission, is to amuse; and, indeed, when Mr. Jefferson is the missionary, one is not inclined very obstinately to combat this theory.

V.

MR. AND MRS. FLORENCE IN 'THE MIGHTY DOLLAR.'

(*Gaiety Theatre, September, 1880.*)

The Mighty Dollar, like its forerunner, *Colonel Sellers*, and like most American plays which have made their way to our stage, depends for its attractions, not on the interest of its plot, the skill of its construction, the strength or picturesqueness of its scenes, but on the individual qualities of the actor. Though as a piece of dramatic work it is about on a par with its predecessor, yet as a source of amusement it is certainly its superior, and that for many reasons. In the first place, it is shorter—a strong reason in itself. In the next place, instead of one

bright particular star there are two ; one is not therefore wearied with the monotonous brilliancy of a single luminary, and when the exigencies of the piece demand that they should shine together, it is so contrived that they reflect and enhance without interfering with each other's light. Again, the serious interest, such as it is, is not of so severe and tragic a nature as that which was infused into the story of Colonel Sellers, and the contrast is in proportion less violent and grotesque. The story of the play is indeed as slight as is compatible with the elastic principles dramatic work has now assumed. At the commencement the author appears to have had some design of evolving a plot, but circumstances perhaps proved too strong for him, and he is soon, and no doubt wisely, content to let his story become merely the vehicle to relieve the exertions of the two chief actors. These are Mr. and Mrs. Florence, who appear respectively as 'the Hon. Bardwell Slote, Member of Congress from the Cohosh district,' and 'Mrs. Gen'l Gilflory, who has lived so long abroad.' The former is a needy adventurer, who depends for his livelihood on his power of passing certain bills through Congress, a power which in its turn depends less upon his eloquence or his logic than upon the logic and the eloquence of the 'mighty dollar.' He is, in other words, what Englishmen, and perhaps also Americans if they were pressed,

would be inclined to call an unconscionable rogue; yet withal a very entertaining rogue, and, according to his lights, a harmless and good-natured one. The picture is admitted in the playbill to be slightly exaggerated, and perhaps one might stretch the admission still further. On this point only those conversant with the various types of politicians to be found in the Capitol at Washington can decide, and they only will probably be able to appreciate the nice gradations of the character. But others of less experience can see that Mr. Florence is an actor of much native humour, and the laughter he provokes is as much due to his method of presentation as to the character he presents, though the novelty of the latter considerably enhances, of course, the merits of the former. Perhaps one may instance Mr. Toole as a counterpart to him on our own stage; he seems to have much of the same strong personality (though on this, of course, one cannot speak with certainty after seeing him only in one character); the method also of the two actors has many points of resemblance.

The character presented by Mrs. Florence is less original. The rich, vulgar, good-natured woman, who has scampered through half the cities of Europe, and affects other tongues in preference to her own, is a familiar figure enough in every department of fiction. Yet the actress, I thought, brought to it more originality of her

own ; her performance struck me as altogether more truly artistic than that of her husband. Certainly she was a little less extravagant ; while the Hon. Bardwell Slote was pure farce, about Mrs. Gilflory there were touches of something not unlike real comedy. Both of them have certain catchwords, or forms of speech which answer to catchwords, which they both manage with singular skill and economy. Mr. Slote's consists in certain phrases, more or less familiar to readers of American literature of a certain class, which he represents by what he conceives to be the initial letters of the words ; Mrs. Gilflory's lies in her broken French, which is of a singularly atrocious sort. Nothing on the stage is, as a rule, more tiresome and irritating than the hunting to death of a word or phrase which has, on its first introduction, successfully tickled the audience, and nothing is, unfortunately, more common with our comic actors. But Mr. and Mrs. Florence manage this dangerous ally with so much skill, they find for it such nice occasions, such happy varieties of form, that it really becomes in their hands a legitimate and welcome addition to the entertainment—and in this respect, if in no other, some of our actors might learn a very useful lesson from our visitors. The rest of the performance was not of a very brilliant order of art ; but it is, one may suppose, a necessity of this form of play, and of these inter-

national exhibitions, as they might be styled, that this should be so. Jove's satellites must be less than Jove if his supremacy is to endure.

VI.

MR. FLORENCE AS CAPTAIN CUTTLE.

(*Gaiety Theatre, November, 1880.*)

An American version of *Dombey and Son* has been produced to give Mr. Florence a chance of exhibiting his powers of drollery in another character than that in which Englishmen have hitherto seen him. The version—it can hardly be called a play—is said to be regarded with particular favour in America, and indeed I can well believe it. It is one of the most signal instances of retribution that has ever occurred in the world of literature. Many bad versions of Dickens' novels have been set by English hands upon our stage before, but none, as an Englishman I am proud to think, quite so bad as this. *Martin Chuzzlewit* and the *American Notes* are avenged a hundredfold.

This remarkable product of American invention may be said to bear about the same relation to Dickens' work as the famous *Kean* of Alexandre Dumas bore to the manners and people it was supposed to pourtray. The fact that it is less a

play than an incoherent and inconsequent succession of scenes, in which figures labelled with the names of Dickens' characters are pushed on and off the stage with no set design or apparent purpose, need cause no very great surprise. Much more than this are few of the plays contrived out of these novels, and indeed much more than this could be no play, perhaps, constructed out of any novel by Dickens. But most of those who have put their hands to this work have at least contrived to preserve as far as was possible the author's idiosyncracies of thought and language. The essential difference between a play and a novel must of course be allowed for, and, moreover, many of these idiosyncracies belong less to Dickens's characters than to himself. But those unique creations of his comic genius with their quaint phraseology, so much of which is now very 'household words,' have wisely been respected, for indeed the man has yet to be born who is to beat Dickens in his own peculiar field. Yet even from this the daring American has not refrained. He has bestowed on Captain Cuttle, nor on the Captain only, a phraseology of his own, which surely something more than insular prejudice must forbid Englishmen to regard in the light of an improvement. What, one cannot but wonder, would Americans think and say, were they to see on their own stage an English version of Bret Harte's 'Stories of the Sierras,' in which

the adapter had invented for Mr. Oakhurst, Colonel Starbottle, or Yuba Bill, language and sentiments of his own? Curious as the effect would be, the comments on the effect would, one is disposed to think, be more curious still.

Many of the defects which disfigured this unfortunate performance were due, let it be granted, to the singular inefficiency of the company collected to assist Mr. Florence in the discharge of his onerous duties. They failed not only to give any touch of reality to the creations of Dickens, which was, in the circumstances, not much, perhaps, to be wondered at, but even to exhibit any individuality of their own. Like the decorations of the stage on which they stood, they appeared to have done duty so often in other scenes, and for other purposes, that they were unable, at a moment's notice, to assume a complexion and a purpose for which they were not designed. It is a theory, however, in some quarters, that anything is good enough for a morning performance, and if the public like to accept the theory, no one has any right to say them nay.

Of Mr. Florence himself more, of course, is to be said. His native powers of drollery, if not of very wide or various range, are exuberant and peculiar. They may not satisfy every taste, but their existence cannot be gainsaid, and they would always suffice to prevent any part he might under-

take, from being altogether flat or uninteresting. His Captain Cuttle, therefore, has a certain distinction of its own, which can hardly fail to provoke laughter, even from those who are conscious that, save in one respect, it bears little if any resemblance to the Cuttle Dickens drew. In respect of outward seeming, it is, indeed, admirable—the very incarnation of the strange being that Phiz has realised for us. And in this respect it is, perhaps, superior to the Cuttle of Emery, which should not yet have been forgotten. But in this respect only; the moment the actor opens his mouth the vision fades. It is not only that there is so strong a flavour of Bardwell Slote about it—this perhaps is no more than was to be expected—but it is that there is so little flavour of the real man about it. We miss the sincerity, the good faith, the tenderness, which Emery so well hit off, and which are as much essentials of the character as the iron hook, the hard glazed hat, the enormous shirt collars, the quaint phraseology. The American Cuttle is comical certainly, but he is only comical, and far too consciously comical. For example, when he pleads his old friend's cause with Mr. Dombey, and deposits on that scandalised merchant's table all his worldly goods as security for the petitioned loan, he fails to convince us that he does so in good faith, in the belief that they will be accepted in the spirit in which they are given. Ridiculous enough he makes the transaction, but

he makes it ridiculous only. And still more clear is this defect in the joviality which he assumes to cheer Sol Gills and his nephew, when the news of the West India appointment is broken to the former. It is so obviously designed, not to lighten the old man's grief, but to make the spectator laugh. In itself no doubt his manner is comical enough, but in the circumstances of the scene it seems strangely out of place, and cruel. It may be said, indeed, that the Captain is himself so grotesque a creation, so far removed from the pale of reality, that no actor could out-Dickens Dickens. But herein lies the difference between the true actor and the mimic. Beneath the monstrous exterior that the novelist conceived he placed a heart; to his caricature he gave a life and humanity of its own. Of this Emery never suffered us to lose sight; but of this Mr. Florence never suffers us to catch sight.

‘OTHELLO’ AT THE LYCEUM.

The very successful issue of Mr. Irving's recent venture seems rather to discount a remark which some of us may have lately read in *Punch*, to the effect that ‘there was just one thing Shakespeare could not do, write a tolerable play for a nineteenth century audience.’ Of course in considering this sentence, rather startling perhaps at first, one must have regard to two things—that we are not intended to take quite seriously any expression of opinion in a paper that is avowedly nothing if not humorous; and again, that it is obviously not *Punch's* cue to be much impressed with tragedy, or to expatiate very feelingly on its beauties. Still, his verdict may be taken to represent, with more or less completeness, a considerable balance of English taste. Many people, as we all know—cultured and intelligent people—while professing, doubtless in all honesty, to find in Shakespeare the great pleasure and solace of their studious hours, have yet been of

opinion that he cuts but a dull figure on the stage. This opinion was perhaps more widely held a few years ago, but the observation quoted from *Punch*, a final sentence pronounced *ex cathedra* after a careful revision of the matter, shows that it still holds its ground in certain quarters. On the other hand, Mr. Irving has not less conclusively proved, nor in this instance only, that there are a considerable number of people who think differently. It is tolerably clear that Shakespeare is no longer found to spell ruin in our theatres, as he was averred to spell it some years ago by one who spoke certainly with experience, but was himself perhaps not quite aware how many different ways there are in which the poet's own name may be spelled. Mr. Irving has evidently found the right way, or at least the way which we are, many of us, at present agreed shall be right. And on this such of us as are disposed to do so may surely congratulate ourselves without any suspicion of selfishness.

'Such and so various are the tastes of men.'

And when one remembers how very large London is, how bountifully supplied with theatres, how greatly of late years the stock of playgoers has increased, it really seems as though the rival muses of *Punch* and Shakespeare should find room to disport themselves without treading on each other's skirts. As the late Lord Lytton has

pertinently remarked, when deprecating a too illiberal vein he found in Hazlitt’s method of criticism, ‘no one if he would praise a racehorse thinks it necessary to abuse a lion.’ And surely, grateful as we all must be to *Punch* for his brilliant and untiring efforts to lighten ‘the weary load of human kind,’ it seems as though there should be other and more obvious ways of doing this than to point the finger of scorn at Shakespeare because he did not write farces for the nineteenth century.

Merely to say of a play that it is successful, stands for very little now when so many paths lie open to theatrical success. The relations between an actor and his audience have now grown so much more personal and intimate; we are so quick to merge the actor in the man, to approve our friendship rather than our judgment; that almost every theatre can rely on its own immediate circle of clients for at least a temporary measure of patronage and applause. Indeed a theatre has only to be in the vogue, to contain one or two popular favourites, to command, as one may say, success without invariable reference to its present deserts. Hence, in assuming the almost universal favour that *Othello* has met with, to be a triumphant refutation of Shakespeare’s alleged inability to satisfy a modern audience, certain allowances have to be made. Mr. Irving’s popularity; Mr. Booth’s

popularity, and a certain sense of national courtesy as well ; the curiosity to see these so much talked of actors on the same stage ; the inborn taste for comparison which animates every human breast, and is really so much less odious than is traditionally supposed—can indeed, when properly employed, be made of real and lasting value as well as the amusement of an hour : all these feelings, very natural and proper as they are, must be taken into account before we can really arrive at the share borne by the actual merit of the performance in the great sum of success which it has achieved. But when these deductions have been made—and they must be made if we would get to the heart of the matter, see what it really means, how much of permanent and true interest it has for us ; if we would satisfy ourselves, in short, whether we have been doing anything more than

‘ Snatch a turbid inspiration
From some transient earthly sun ;’

when the last echo of applause has died out from our ears, and the glare of the footlights passed from off our eyes ; when we sit down calmly to consider what it really is that we have gone out to see,—then, and not till then, we find we may really take some little comfort ; that our much abused and derided theatre has really produced something to which, without vanity, we may point

as a proof that this nineteenth century of ours, despite the jibes of *Punch*, is not wholly unworthy to enjoy the heritage of Shakespeare. Many of us can doubtless still remember how desperate a blow was struck at a great reputation when the stately eulogy pronounced by Macaulay on the various and splendid work of English literature—that eulogy which most of us at the time read with such a conscious glow of triumph, and accepted in such simple honesty—was declared to be in truth both ‘vulgar’ and ‘retarding.’ Self-conceit, we were then reminded, and the laziness coming from self-conceit, are the two great banes of humanity. It is, therefore, with the utmost trepidation that I would hazard the doubt whether, even in the happiest days of the poetic drama, in the golden prime of our theatre, wheresoever that mystic age should be placed, this noble play can ever have been as *a whole* much more satisfactorily presented; more completely and intelligently placed upon the stage, with a better distribution of parts or a more careful observation of detail—of those details which, trivial as they may separately seem to careless eyes, are yet, as we are happily growing to see more and more clearly, of such inestimable value to the thorough perfecting of all theatric work.

Perhaps the first idea one gets from this *Othello* is how well, to use a cant term of the theatre, the

part of Iago plays itself. The villainy of the man is so supreme and triumphant ; he takes us into his confidence so unreservedly, flatters us with a sort of consciousness of intellectual superiority in not being as these others are, his dupes ; he puts us on good terms with ourselves—establishes, as it were, a sort of chain of intelligence, a bond of sympathy. He is the great master-mind of the piece ; he can sound them all, these Othellos, Roderigos, Cassios, ' from the lowest note to the top of the compass,' and all the while we are in his secret. Thus he claims our attention from the first by the most infallible of all charms, the charm of personal confidence ; and having once got our ear, he deepens the impression, draws us yet closer to him by a mysterious fascination that has almost as much of admiration as of horror in it ; a feeling, as Hazlitt rightly points out, akin to that which leads us always to read the accounts in the newspapers of dreadful fires and shocking murders, leads so many of us to frequent executions (it is Hazlitt who speaks) and trials. We marvel at the genius who could create Othello, but for the man himself we really feel not much more perhaps than a half-familiar, half-contemptuous pity. We may shudder at his rage, we may weep at his agony ; yet in our hearts the while we cannot but feel a touch of scorn for the man so easily gulled, as we wiser souls see him to be. But it is Iago himself who interests us, the

very man ; in his presence we forget Shakespeare for a time. Again, that part of him which he bears 'in compliment extern,' is so clear and obvious ; his shrewd tongue, his rough honesty, his good fellowship ; all these superficial points—superficial only as being on the surface—could hardly fail to commend themselves, to go home to the dullest comprehension. To master the text, and to deliver it in such manner as to be intelligible to the audience, and to impress the fact that it is intelligible to the speaker—really if an actor did this, one might almost be content that he should do no more. Good Iagos and bad there are, of course, and always will be ; but the bad can be bad, one thinks, only by comparison : a positively bad Iago seems a'most an impossible thing ; it is difficult to conceive any actor, the poorest and baldest, as altogether failing to interest in this character. Again, there are so many ways in which the character interests ; there are so many points from which it may be viewed, so many different interpretations of it—different, that is, in degree—all possible evolutions of the text, and all, from their own point of view, interesting. Take, for example, the Iagos of Mr. Booth and Mr. Irving ; no two presentments of the same character could well be more different, yet how interesting are both.

This character as understood and presented by these two actors, very clearly marks the distin-

guishing quality of their respective styles. The American Iago, clear, cool and precise, admirably thought out, never deviating a hair's-breadth from the preconceived plan; design and execution marching hand in hand with ordered step from the first scene to the last; a performance of marvellous balance and regularity, polished to the very finger-nail. The Englishman's, startling, picturesque, irregular, brilliant sometimes, sometimes less brilliant than bizarre, but always fresh and suggestive, always bearing that peculiar stamp of personality which has so often saved the actor in his sorest straits. Mr. Irving's performance one carries away with one and thinks about; Mr. Booth's, too, one thinks about—when reminded of it. Nevertheless, as a work of art, an artistic whole, self-contained and complete, to the latter's I should, for my part, give the palm. Mr. Irving's is marred throughout by one great fault, the fault which is so commonly reckoned to him as a virtue, from which indeed he has often contrived to extract virtue, but which, call it fault or virtue, yet remains one of the most dangerous qualities an actor can have—a *perpetual striving after something new*. He is never content to do as others have done, to find the same meaning in words that others have found, to read human nature as others read it. It has been truly said of Mr. Irving that he is never commonplace; but it should also be remembered that this

freedom from commonplace may sometimes be purchased at the expense of common sense. Merely to be unlike others is not necessarily to be superior to others, though undoubtedly this is a form of superiority very highly prized in these days. Some of Mr. Irving's best work, his most valuable work, as well as his most popular, has certainly been inspired by this quality; but no less certainly has it pricked him on not unfrequently to some very daring and extravagant flights. The more sober of his admirers have, of course, long ago discriminated these two phases; seen when and how he was original because he had really originated some new point of the character he was portraying, brought into fresh light some feature of his author hitherto unrecognised or disregarded; and when he was original only in the form he gave to his inability to cope with the matter in hand. Take the soliloquies, for example, in this very character. No actor, or none at least with whose style I myself happen to be familiar, has ever delivered soliloquies in this manner before; no actor, one feels, but this one, would dare so to deliver them, with so supreme a defiance of all conventional rules. Other actors *act* them, declaim them, hurl them, so to speak, at our heads, as though arguing with us and not with their own conscience. But though in this instance, as in others, of which all who have ever seen Mr. Irving can doubtless

recall one or more, this quality has proved of the greatest value to him, it has also sometimes proved of very doubtful value, sometimes even distinctly hurtful. If we take his Iago as a whole, the conception of the character, and the form given to the conception, we find not an 'ancient,' a poor soldier of fortune, but a splendid triumphant cavalier, wearing far costlier garments than his superior officer, and ruffling it so bravely, that in truth it were rather him than the gentle Desdemona Cassio should call 'our great captain's captain.' Cassio himself he throws completely in the shade, and stands on the same footing as Othello: he is always the dominant figure in the scene, the one whom the eye first singles out and rests on longest. How much of this arises from his idea of the character, how much from that fatal law of theatrical etiquette which ordains the first actor in the theatre to be the alpha and omega of every play, it would be difficult to say; but the fact remains. The effect is fine, no doubt, sometimes very fine, yet I cannot but think it is a false effect. In Mr. Booth's Iago there is no touch of this; there the actor is always in proportion, always in his proper place and perspective.

Mr. Irving has been greatly praised for sundry little 'touches of nature,' as they are somewhat recklessly called, with which he is in the habit of adorning and enlivening all his characters; little

acts, gestures, movements, postures, and changes of posture, such as no other actor ever employs, or would probably conceive the idea of employing. Sometimes these are very happy, answering their purpose most felicitously, really bringing out and marking the character and the circumstance. Sometimes they strike only as excrescences, as the offspring only of nervousness—a restlessness born of that unconquerable desire to be always doing something, and to be doing that something differently from every one else. Of this latter phase there are many instances in his Iago: he is never for an instant still, always playing with his cap, or his dress, or his moustachios, slapping Roderigo on the back, throwing his arm round his neck, walking here, leaning there, now sitting on a table, now leaning against a pillar. At first this perpetual movement no doubt strikes the eye and pleases the sense, gives an air of homeliness and nature to the character, removes it from the stage into real life, as it were; but after a time it wearies, must weary, one thinks, even the actor himself. Two instances seem particularly to have taken the public fancy; one, when Mr. Irving, soliloquising, picks his teeth with his dagger and afterwards wipes it on his sleeve; the other where, while Cassio talks with Desdemona awaiting Othello's landing, Mr. Irving carelessly plucks and eats a bunch of grapes. Now of the first of these, it is

not in itself an elegant action, neither does it in any way assist the character, bring out any salient feature, or point any particular phrase; on the contrary, though it might be an action native enough to the leather-jerkined buff-booted 'ancient' one is accustomed to, it scarcely harmonises with this splendid Iago. Of the second, though the action is easy and natural enough, yet how much less really natural to the character than Mr. Booth's still, respectful attitude, leaning against the sundial, alert to execute any command, seeming careless what goes on so long as he is ready when wanted, yet ever watching his prey with sly, sleepless, vigilance. No doubt Mr. Irving greatly heightens by this behaviour the contrasts of this wonderful character; by thus emphasizing and accentuating its ease, gaiety, and natural freedom of manner, he deepens the tremendousness of its villany. But these contrasts want no heightening, this villany no deepening. Here no actor can hope to improve on Shakespeare, if he may ever hope to do so. Iago is no unnatural monster, no chaos of irreconcilable opposites; he is a man, and a natural man enough, if one looks carefully at his character, not as this actor or that may have conceived it, but as Shakespeare has drawn it—though of course the warranty for his conduct is greatly weakened by the unfortunate custom, apparently a law of our stage, of assigning Emilia to a lady old enough to be Desdemona's

mother, nor scarcely likely to awaken jealousy in the most suspicious breast. This delight in violent and abnormal contrasts is one of the worst qualities of Mr. Irving's style. He has too little sense of proportion, too little skill in blending the lights and shades of his characters; with him there is no shade but the blackness of night, no light but the whiteness of the lily. Yet with all these deficiencies—and many of them in a less interesting actor would be little worth noting—his Iago must always remain a singularly brilliant and picturesque performance; more striking to the eye than Mr. Booth's, at first more alluring to the sense; but less so, I cannot but think, on reflection.

Iago, I have said, there are so many ways of playing; so many sides from which his character may be viewed, from each of which something of value and interest may be extracted even by the least brilliant of actors. But with Othello this is not so. I have ventured to express a belief that almost any actor, if certain conditions were granted, could play Iago tolerably well; I will now venture further, and express a doubt whether any actor ever did or ever will play Othello entirely and completely well. We have all of us read, of course, of Edmund Kean in this character; of his passion and energy, the magnificent pathos with which he delivered certain passages, the beautiful apostrophe, 'Then, oh, farewell,' &c.,

for instance, in which, according to Hazlitt, his voice 'struck on the heart like the swelling notes of some divine music, like the sound of years of departed happiness.' But the same critic, surely no ungenerous or cold one to Kean, complains that he was *all* passion and energy, 'too uniformly on the verge of extravagance, too constantly on the rack.' And he goes on, 'This does very well in certain characters, as Zanga or Bajazet, where there is merely a physical passion, a boiling of the blood to be expressed, but it is not so in the lofty-minded and generous Moor.' He missed too often in Kean; though glimpses of it he allows were to be caught, what he rightly marks as the true note of this magnificent work of human genius, 'the noble tide of deep and sustained passion.' It is true the late George Lewes, a very shrewd critic of the stage, as of most things, has praised Kean more roundly; but then he criticised, as he himself allows, from memory, very many years after Kean had left the scene of his great triumphs, in those later days when we begin to

'hear the echoes through the mountains throng,
The winds come to us from the fields of sleep;'

when we begin to feel, or to think we feel

'That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.'

We get a curious instance of this in one of his sayings, which he notes as a particular impression

that his memory has left him of Kean. 'Kean,' says Lewes, 'vigilantly and patiently rehearsed every detail, trying the tones till his ear was satisfied; practising looks and gestures until his artistic sense was satisfied; *and having once regulated these he never changed them.*' But Hazlitt, writing of Kean's *Othello*, after seeing it again six years after its greatness had first struck him, says, '*he played it with variations, and therefore necessarily worse.*' But indeed one has only to read through Mr. Lewes's observations on Charles Matthews, on Fechter, on Salvini, to detect the difference; to mark where the writer is criticising the living present, and where he is criticising the memory of the past. Another thing, too, let me note; Mr. Lewes seems to have read the character somewhat differently from Hazlitt. In one and the same breath he declares *Othello*, which he justly names as the most trying of all Shakespeare's parts, to have been Kean's masterpiece, and Kean himself to have been wholly unable to be calmly dignified, to have been nothing if not passionate. I would rather say *Othello* can be nothing if not calmly dignified. Passionate, of course, he must be, but it must be with that terrible passion of a calm, majestic soul, 'of one not easily moved, but who, being moved, is stirred to the very depth.' An *Othello* who impresses us from the first with a sense of passion, and of passion only, is unable really to stir and terrify when the proper moment

for passion comes. A *fierce* Othello is a monstrosity.

‘ Now, by heaven,
My blood begins my safer guides to rule ;
And passion, having my best judgment collied,
Assays to lead the way.’

But if Othello never shows us these safer guides, this best judgment ? These are not the words of a fierce, passionate nature, but rather of one, capable indeed of great depths of passion, but knowing how to restrain and temper them with judgment ; of one, let me say again, *not easily moved, but who, being moved, is stirred to the very depths.*

‘ Hold your hands,
Both you of my inclining, and the rest ;
Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it
Without a prompter.’

This is the true ‘ noble Moor.’

Both Mr. Booth and Mr. Irving fail in this essential quality, though not both in the same degree, nor both quite from the same causes. Both, indeed, show glimpses of it, but neither can keep hold of it. Mr. Booth’s voice and presence are against him here ; his accent, though certainly much less conspicuous than one might expect, yet ever and again jars painfully on English ears ; and though mere smallness of stature signifies little—Kean, we know, was a small man, and so is Salvini, whose bearing is yet

very stately and imposing—there is something in Mr. Booth's presence, with all its grace and agility, that seems to forbid true nobility and majesty of demeanour. Yet glimpses of it sometimes he undoubtedly shows, notably in the speech, 'Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them,' and again in the passage just quoted, 'Hold your hands,' &c. But in the later scenes he loses sight of it altogether; in these he is tumultuous, fierce, passionate, but never grand, never terrible. Such, indeed, to me it seems as though it were not in his power to be; to me he seems to be essentially an actor of intellect, not of feeling. When he strives to express the latter he is compelled to fall back on the emptiest, and alas, commonest resource of the actor's art—on noise. One of the shrewdest and sanest of our modern critics of the theatre has recently, in treating of this very performance, hazarded a doubt whether it is possible for Othello not to rant. 'When his moments of frenzy arrive,' he says, 'when he is required to exclaim, *Whip me, ye devils! Roast me in sulphur!* and so on, I think his listeners must prepare to hear from him something very like ranting. Othello is fairly mad at last, should he not rave? I have little doubt that Edmund Kean's Othello raved and ranted very freely indeed.' Precisely so; and it is just because Edmund Kean's Othello raved and ranted so freely that

he failed to satisfy the acute and clear-seeing intelligence of Hazlitt. No doubt, as the writer observes, 'the ear of our playgoers is unaccustomed to oratory; and still more certainly Othello is not to be played as a comedy by the late Mr. Robertson is treated upon the stage.' Anything which rises above the colloquial drawl of the modern stage is too apt to be called ranting; but between that drawl and real undisguised ranting there are many varieties of speech, and it is one among these varieties that the true Othello should employ. Sound and fury there must be, but it is when that sound and fury signify nothing that we get *ranting*. The phrase is regarded as so peculiarly offensive, one of the lowest almost that can be applied to an actor's style, that one is loth to apply it to so intelligent and cultured a performer as Mr. Booth; but certainly in the 'torrent, tempest, and whirlwind of *his* passion,' there is but little to recall the noble and lofty-minded Moor. One speech in particular is so thoroughly unworthy of his intelligence, that I would especially note it; this is the last speech, that magnificent farewell speech, which surely, in the place and circumstance of its delivery, is one of the most affecting passages in the whole domain of poetry, ancient and modern:

'Soft you; a word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know 't.

No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate
Speak of me as I am ; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice ; then, must you speak
Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well ;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme ; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe ; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unuse'd to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this ;
And say, besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcisèd dog,
And smote him—thus.'

One can imagine Othello standing erect beside the bed with its 'tragic loading,' giving voice to these beautiful words with the settled calm of a despair, a hopelessness more terrible, more touching than all 'the sobbing Phrygian strains' in the world, piercing the ears, but leaving the heart cold and unstirred. Yet Mr. Booth, as did Edmund Kean, as indeed has every Othello done whom I have ever seen, *acts* this speech, with violent gestures and disordered voice, as though the frenzy of passion had still hold of his mind. He who can so misconceive this passage can never truly realise Othello.

Mr. Irving gets nearer in many ways to the true man. In the tumult and fury of his passion he gets, indeed, farther away from him, for in

such scenes Mr. Irving gets altogether away from humanity. That strange and inexplicable method of speech and action which he has chosen to adopt as proper to the expression of the highest tragedy, in such scenes so overmasters and transforms him, that criticism is completely baffled. It is true that he has of late considerably modified these unfortunate vagaries—in his Iago, indeed, they are for the most part conspicuous mainly by their absence; but there, of course, there is not the same scope for them, for in Iago there is no height of passion; still in this Othello they are much less obtrusive than they were in the Othello of his earlier days. But they are still to be seen, and so long as they are to be seen, so long will Mr. Irving remain unable, in the greatest scenes of tragedy, to satisfy all but those who love these unlovely things for their own sake. An actor must express his author's conception as well as understand it; merely to show that he understands it, without being able to give that understanding its proper form and colour, is but the smallest part of his business. True it is that in our modern theatre this fact is most sadly overlooked. True it is, and in this truth lies the most fatal weakness of our stage, that in these days the actor is paramount, the author nothing, a mere necessary appanage of the theatre, like the carpenter, the scene-shifter, or the call-boy. He is but one of the many satellites of the great

Joves of the theatrical galaxy. It is the power of the actor only that we recognise now; it is his intellect, his personality, his style that we admire—even his peculiarities, so long as they are his own; without any heed of the effect they may have on the creations of the author, without whom these objects of our admiration could not exist. And thus it is we use so complacently that most empty phrase that we have borrowed, together with so many other empty things, from the French theatre, talking rapturously of the brilliant actor who ‘creates’ a part, without a thought of the poor author who has spun, as Bacon says, ‘out of his own entrails,’ the web of this actor’s fame. With more justice, really with how much more justice, might we talk of a printer, or a publisher, ‘creating’ a book! To such thoughtless critics, how aptly comes the reproach which the wise Ulysses cast on Achilles and his flatterers.

‘They tax our policy, and call it cowardice,
Count wisdom as no member of the war,
ForeSTALL prescience, and esteem no act
But that of hand: the still and mental parts—
That do contrive how many hands shall strike,
When fitness calls them on, and know by measure
Of their observant toil the enemies’ weight—
Why, this hath not a finger’s dignity:
They call this bed-work, mappery, closet-war;
So that the ram that batt’ers down the wall,
For the great swing and rudeness of his poise,

They place before his hand that made the engine,
Or those that with the fineness of their souls
By reason guide his execution.'

And so long as this is so, so long as plays are made to measure, and the actor is the first figure in our drama, so long will that drama remain the same poor abortive growth it is now; so long shall we have the same thin and slovenly work moving for ever on the same false and narrow lines; so long shall we have such remarks as that which I quoted at the beginning of this paper, 'that Shakespeare could not write a tolerable play for a nineteenth-century audience.'

Such a sentiment as this it is which has fostered and encouraged Mr. Irving into the extravagances of style which often disfigure even his sanest and most intelligent work. And it is because one gets such work from him that one truly feels the pity of that foolish unthinking admiration which has done so much, is every day doing so much, to debase our art, whether in the theatre, the painting-room, or the study. And had Mr. Irving, when first he began, to take the public eye, been rescued from this baneful and enervating influence into a clearer and keener atmosphere, it is hard to doubt that one of his energy and acuteness would not have resolved to put away these childish vanities from him—would not have resolved and have succeeded.

Yet despite these grave defects, the gravest an actor can have—for what obstacle can be more serious to an actor than that he has not learned to speak the language in which he acts, has not mastered the medium by which he must stamp upon the world the impress of his art?—in spite of these, Mr. Irving still, to my mind, more truly understands the noble Moor than does Mr. Booth. One hardly likes to say he more truly realises him, for that is a phrase may hardly be applied to either; but he more truly understands him. He is more dignified, more grand, more noble; he is a *greater personality*. It is the method he has adopted to give the impress of this personality which is so retarding. His extreme deliberation of speech, his waywardness of emphasis, his strange pronunciation which no known system of orthography can justify, his ungainly habit of movement: such are the barriers which in his immaturer days he himself placed in his onward path; it is the struggle to emancipate himself from these which so often and so sadly mars even his best work. Yet behind this unlovely veil one gets ever and again a glimpse of the truth. If he would consent to be natural—not natural in the sense that some people talk of Robertson’s comedies as natural—not commonplace, colloquial, vulgar; but if, by loosing his art from those barbaric fetters in which he once chose to

imprison it, he would allow himself the strength and freedom to deal with that conception as, by showing that he understands it he has shown that he should be able to deal with it—then, it might be, we should at last get sight of the real Othello, the generous, the high-minded; the man not of physical passion only, but of lofty soul and resolute will; the Moor noble, as well as valiant.

Much else too there is in this presentation one would gladly linger over; the Desdemona, the Cassio, the Roderigo, the Brabantio. But time and space are inexorable now as in the days of the elder Scriblerus. Othello, too, and Iago, must still be first and paramount; well played or ill, they must, amid all the other characters, 'stand up and take the morning.' Yet the others, how they all contribute, each according to its own degree, to this supreme and glorious whole! And here it may be noted with what strange blindness we have all agreed to expunge Bianca from our stage. The mistake of an Emilia, 'declined into the vale of years,' who has left behind her the fatal gift of beauty, has already been touched upon; yet surely this oversight is graver still. It is through Cassio's mistress that the last proof is supplied; by her comes the voice denouncing doom to the gentle Desdemona. Read the first scene of the fourth act through; take away the scene between Iago and Cassio, which Othello sees but hears not—

‘As he shall smile Othello shall go mad,
And his unbookish jealousy must construe
Poor Cassio’s smiles, gestures, and light behaviour
Quite in the wrong.’

Really if this scene be taken away it seems as though even Othello should stop short of murder. Surely, as the poison now works, he is somewhat too easily moved.

But of the others: limited as is Miss Terry’s range, wayward and uneven as she herself so often is within that range, yet within it and at her best no living actress of our stage can stand beside her. Of all our actresses, accomplished as so many of them are, and some at least greater artists than Miss Terry, she alone has that rare and precious gift of charm, that gift to which the dullest of us can never be insensible, which the cleverest can never analyse nor define; like the grand style it can be only *spiritually discerned*. In parts like Desdemona and Ophelia, and, to come lower down in the scale, Olivia, in Mr. Wills’s version of the *Vicar of Wakefield*, we get this inestimable quality in its highest and purest form. In the earnest tenderness of her appeal to the Duke, that pretty conflict between her ‘divided duty;’ in the playful tenderness of her pleading for Cassio; in the deep yet simple pathos of her appeal to Iago, ‘What shall I do to win my lord again?’ of her answer to his greeting:—

'Those which do teach young babes,
Do it with gentle means and easy tasks ;
He might have chid me so ; for, in good faith,
I am a child to chiding :'

we get what none other of her contemporaries can give ; much they can give which she cannot ; but this is hers alone, this seeming simple tenderness and grace, these 'tears in the voice,' as the French say—in a word, this charm, for there is indeed no other word that can so fitly denote this rare and delicate quality. It has been objected to her that in the scene with Iago she is something too familiar, forgets too far the distinction between the captain's wife and the poor ancient. But surely this is not so. She has been in a manner entrusted to Iago's keeping from the first ; his wife is her companion and confidant ; she has the utmost faith in his honesty and kindness ; surely it is not unnatural that in the sudden shock and pressure of this stunning blow she should turn for comfort and protection to the stoutest shelter near her.

For Cassio there is Mr. Terriss, a very promising young actor, of pleasing presence and appearance, and who does not seem inclined, as some young actors are apt to seem, to rely solely on these aids to distinction. His Cassio is a very spirited and agreeable performance, soldierly and yet well-bred, as of one equally at home in camp and court. Alone, of all the Cassios our later stage

has seen, he remains a gentleman in his cups ; such an one as, one can truly see, would never hold with Iago that the offence of a bodily wound is greater than the offence of a lost reputation. The solemn, yet never tedious, gravity of Mr. Meade's Brabantio, his stately anger, and no less stately tenderness ; the clear and polished elocution of Mr. Beaumont as the Duke ; the foolishness of Mr. Pinero's Roderigo, never degenerating into buffoonery—he is quite as earnest in his way as Iago himself—all these are well worthy of note ; all tending, each in its own degree, to give that proper finish and proportion to the whole which is so greatly to be desired in all such work ; and which is, perhaps, a more distinctive and a more valuable feature of this presentation than even the individual merits of Mr. Irving and Mr. Booth, or the happy meeting of two such distinguished actors on one stage.

OUR RUDE FOREFATHERS.

‘Tho’ justly Greece her eldest sons admires,
Why should not we be wiser than our sires ?
In every public virtue we excel ;
We build, we paint, we sing, we dance as well,
And learned Athens, to our art must stoop,
Could she behold us tumbling through a hoop.’

I.

GEORGE BARNWELL.

(*The Gaiety Theatre, April, 1880.*)

IT may be gathered from the general tenour of the advertisements that have heralded this performance, that the purpose of disinterring from their dusty recesses in the dramatic library certain plays whose vogue has long since passed away, is to prove to the present generation the superiority of their taste to that of their forefathers. But, in the press, doubtless, of more important matters, it

has apparently been forgotten that, while it is certainly true that the 'play's the thing,' it is no less true that the immediate, the *theatrical* success of a play, must be in some measure at least due to the style in which it is acted. If a comparison must be drawn between the past and present condition of our theatres, it is obvious that some idea of the former as well of the latter is necessary to make the comparison of any value. Even the manager of this theatre should, one might have thought, be able to see, that to produce a play which pleased our forefathers in a style which it is as certain as anything can be, is not the style that pleased them, cannot count much for a comparison of tastes. It is, of course, impossible to do more than conjecture of the qualities of an actor who lives with us only by tradition; yet it is not, perhaps, rash to suppose, that a play was tolerably well played when such names as King, Charles Kemble, Elliston, Mrs. Pritchard, Mrs. Siddons, and Mrs. Glover figured in the cast. The literary value of *George Barnwell* may be judged at any time by a study of the text—of the text of Lillo's work, of course, not of the acting version now employed; but to pretend to afford an estimate of the appearance it must have presented to an audience permitted to see it treated by such actors as those above named, and others of less but not inconsiderable note, from

this performance at the Gaiety, is only ridiculous.

The success which attended Lillo's play, and particularly in the early years of its vogue—a success, let us admit, which is hardly likely, in any circumstances, to attend it now—arose mainly from those very causes which led the critics of those days to predict its failure. It was considered an idle,—something, indeed, of an impertinent task,—this attempt to enlist the sympathies of the public in the fortunes of any one of low degree. The triumphs and the sorrows of emperors, statesmen and warriors, the loves and woes of queens and great ladies, were the proper subjects of the sublime or tragic Muse; the story of an apprentice who was hung for murdering his uncle at the instigation of a prostitute, was a vulgar theme, fit neither for the dignity of the stage, nor the consideration of polite society. It was lawful, indeed, to weep over the sufferings of Jane Shore, for Shore, though the wife of a goldsmith, was the mistress of a king; but these Barnwells, Thorogoods, Freemans, and Millwoods, were creatures who, though existing possibly in some unknown strata of society, were not such as should be suffered to come between the wind and the nobility of the fine gentlemen and ladies of the Georgian court. But, in truth, it was the humanity of the play that made its fortune, helped in a measure, no doubt, by that fondness for

something new, which in all ages and among all people has never failed to attract for the hour, at least, the majority of mankind. For artificial as the characters to-day may seem to us, tawdry as the sentiments and turgid as the characters may seem, yet all, characters, sentiments, language, approach far nearer the level of humanity than those generally to be found in the favourite plays of the age. Pope's verdict, that Lillo had never deviated from propriety save in a few passages in which he aimed at a greater elevation of language than was consistent with characters and situation, may make some stare as they read scene after scene in which, according to the canons of modern taste, the language is one vast undeviating violation from all propriety. Yet if Lillo's work be examined with reference to the age in which he lived, and the condition of the stage for which he wrote, Pope's verdict will be found for the most part true enough. Far greater men than Lillo committed far greater offences. The most turgid passage in *George Barnwell* seems but tame when compared with many that could be picked at random out of Dryden's or even Otway's plays, and sinks into absolute insignificance before the ordinary style of Lee or Davenant. The dignity of the tragic Muse, it was in those days believed, could be preserved only by elevating her far above the heads of mankind. Even Addison, the most easy, graceful, and

natural of writers, fell into the fashion of the day when he took to tragedy. It is difficult to suppose that the author of that incomparable letter from Sir Roger's butler on his master's death, could not, had he dared to break the bonds of custom, have breathed into his classic phantoms some portion of humanity. From those narrow bonds Lillo, in his *George Barnwell*, managed in some measure to break, perhaps, considering who the man was and what, as much from ignorance as from judgment. But judgment or ignorance, it matters not; it is certain that Lillo got at least nearer to the truth than most of those famous writers, whose tradition he broke, and the critics whose nice tastes he offended. When then we are bidden to laugh to-day at the unreality of Lillo's characters and their language, let us remember at least that to his contemporaries one of the most striking features of the piece was its reality, its *humanity*; it treated of men and women, and not gods and goddesses; not bloodless phantoms labelled with historic names, or fantastic gallants and fine ladies like nothing in the heavens above or in the earth beneath. It is easy enough to discourse about platitudes, commonplaces, cheap moralities, and so forth; but the dealers in this sort of criticism, itself the very essence of the commonplace, might find it worth their while to remember that the sentiment which, altered to fit every form of literary pretence, so

justly wearies us to-day, was in its own shape, perhaps not quite so obvious a truth a century and a half ago.

The faults of the piece are indeed patent enough; 'there needs no ghost come from the grave' to point them to us. But it is no less clear that certain passages in the hands of a fine actor might still be, as certainly they have been, found effective enough. It need be made no very serious charge against the Gaiety company that they failed to produce this effect. It was certainly not a style of play they had been used to, nor was the style of acting it required, one of which they, trained in such a school, could have any knowledge. That they failed, then, to do otherwise than make the play, and themselves, ridiculous, is no fault of theirs; but it conclusively establishes the absurdity of an attempt which seeks to sneer at a taste which could admire a play greatly acted, by showing it to us acted in so different and so ineffectual a manner. We can hardly hope to realise the effect the famous passage in the sixth *Æneid* is said to have had upon Octavia by hearing it recited by a schoolboy on speech-day.

Generation by generation the fashions change—the fashion of dress, of manners, of literary taste; the fashion, one might almost say, of religion. It is well, in some things, that this should be so, for a poor world indeed it would be

where men stood still for ever. We cannot conceive, for instance, a more awful doom for our remote posterity, than that they should find a pleasure in some of the theatrical entertainments in vogue to-day, and particularly at this very theatre. We are asked to laugh at George Barnwell, but George Barnwell at least meant something. What opinion of our taste and intelligence will our descendants have a century and a half hence if some theatrical manager of that day revises for their edification one of our contemporary burlesques? No doubt we have improved greatly on our forefathers; and one of the easiest methods of demonstrating our superiority is to hold up their defects to ridicule. But assuredly it will require some stronger argument than that employed at this theatre to prove that one point of our superiority is to be found in the general condition of our stage. And the argument, when it does come, must, I will add, be supported by some more responsible and less partial evidence than that of a theatrical manager who is apparently proud to advertise himself as a 'licensed dealer in short skirts and legs,'* and to aver, that the qualities necessary to ensure success in his profession are those only which contribute to form a 'successful cheesemonger.'*

* These ingenuous confessions may be read, or might at least, at the time this paper was written, have been read in a work entitled *Plain English*, the production of the Manager of the Gaiety Theatre.

II.

THE CASTLE SPECTRE.

(*The Gaiety Theatre, May, 1880.*)

The *Castle Spectre* of Matthew Gregory Lewis has followed *George Barnwell*, as at once a proof and a warning of the depraved taste of our ancestors. This remarkable work had considerable popularity in its day, and very seasonably helped to replenish Sheridan's empty pockets. It was acted first at Drury Lane in 1797, when its author was but two and twenty years of age, and still in the enjoyment of what Lockhart has aptly styled 'the brushwood fame' of *The Monk*. It was dignified with a good cast, Barrymoor, Wroughton, Charles Kemble, Palmer, Bannister, Mrs. Jordan and Mrs. Powell being among the players. But its popularity, one need hardly say, was limited to that class of the public which always has been, and always will be, attracted by bombastic rants, by coarse jests, by theatrical illusions, by all, in short, that is comprehended under the modern epithet of *sensational*. That portion of our ancestors whom the *Castle Spectre* delighted, have handed on their taste to their descendants, just as they received it from their fathers, and from father to son it will be transmitted so long as there remains a theatre to

gratify it. The taste may be more universal at one time than at another ; the manner may vary a little ; but the matter remains the same. Between the taste which applauds such plays as *Formosa* or *Youth*, and the taste which applauded the *Castle Spectre*, there is a family likeness not to be mistaken. The latter play received, indeed, in its time, every advantage that such a cast as I have specified could afford it. But elsewhere than within the walls of old Drury it was probably played in a very different and what, without injustice, one might call a more congenial style, for surely the poorest company of strolling players that ever made the rafters of a barn ring could hardly do injustice to *The Castle Spectre*. It was to the latter rather than to the former phase of its existence that the performance at the Gaiety yesterday approximated, and those who went to laugh were certainly able to indulge their determination to the full. Yet, among the few who had been drawn thither by different motives, lineal descendants of 'our ancestors,' and sitting in their seats, were some who doubtless thought the play very fine. The applause that came from the gallery, though not of that full-handed nature which gladdened Sheridan's ears from the galleries of Drury, had a genuine ring about it one could not confound with the ironical tribute from the stalls, whose occupants have since probably applauded with all earnestness, and very

possibly taken a part in, something no whit less foolish. So absurd is it, this attempt to 'defile our father's graves!' When we are told that this *Castle Spectre* was the sort of entertainment that our forefathers affected, the question obviously arises, whose forefathers? If it is asserted that it was the educated and intelligent who applauded this stuff, the assertion is on the face of it absurd. The merest glance at the theatrical history of the time is enough to disprove it. If it is asserted that—which was really the case—it was *the people* who approved, the answer is, so do *the people* approve to-day; the only difference being that they will tolerate to-day a quality of acting that their fathers would have hissed off the stage before the first scene was played out. This may demonstrate the superiority of our good nature, but it is hardly so convincing an argument of the superiority of our good taste.

But the manager of this theatre, to whose taste and enterprise we owe these experiments, claims for this play—not out of regard for Lewis's memory, but in support of the argument of ancestral depravity—that it must be considered as fairly representing contemporary taste, because it was written by one of the first literary men of the day. 'Bless thee, Bottom,' one can only say, 'thou art translated' indeed! That 'Monk' Lewis was one of the first literary men of a time which included, to name but a few among

many—Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth, Scott, Keats, Southey, Landor, Coleridge, Campbell, Rogers, Moore—may possibly induce some enterprising publisher to issue a new edition of the *Bravo of Venice*, or of the *Tales of Mystery*, but is rather calculated to cause some curious reflections as to the meaning attributed by some people to the phrase a ‘literary man.’ To be sure, Lewis did, in one form or other, produce a considerable quantity of matter; so, too, did one Thomas Heywood, a contemporary of Shakespeare, who produced, it is said, no less than *two hundred and twenty plays*, yet he scarcely ranks as one of the first literary men of his age. To come to more recent times, Robert Montgomery wrote a poem called *The Omnipresence of the Deity*, which ran in two or three years through eleven editions; yet he is not, we believe, considered one of the first literary men of his age. If the mere production of printed matter elevates a man to this position, the gentlemen to whom we are indebted for the Parliamentary Blue-books must surely have strong claims to it; something even might be said for the compilers of play-bills, who must get through a good deal of writing in their time, and what they write has, moreover, in these days a brisk circulation. Yet even in this respect, there are many of his contemporaries far ahead of Lewis. All he ever wrote does not equal by one half the mere hack-work of such industrious writers

as Scott, or Southey, or Campbell, or even Coleridge; Jeffrey, Giffard, Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt would beat him quite out of the field.

The truth is, as every one knows, of course, who has any knowledge of the literary history of those times, that Lewis was the fashion of the hour, and like a fashion he passed away. 'A good-natured fopling, the pet and plaything of certain fashionable circles,' is Lockhart's verdict, and contemptuous as it may sound, it is the true one. The nick-name by which he has come down to posterity sufficiently indicates the nature of his fame. He wrote and published *The Monk*, when he was a boy of twenty. By its profanity and licentiousness—qualities which have generally succeeded, as our own age can too clearly show, in attracting some notoriety—and also as the work of a young man of some position, it caused no little excitement. The German school of romance, which Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* first introduced to English readers, and of which Mrs. Radcliffe may be styled the English high-priestess, was then in the height of its popularity. While still a student at Christ's Church, Lewis visited Germany, and became an ardent disciple of that school. In all his writings its influence can be traced, often, indeed, something more than traced, for he was as audacious a borrower as Sir Fretful himself. Popular in his day no doubt he was. Byron and Shelley professed to admire *The Monk*

vastly, and in the latter's admiration there was, perhaps, something genuine, for the young writer's defiance of order may well have attracted such a spirit as Shelley's. In his *Tales of Mystery and Wonder*, published in 1801, he had the assistance of Scott, who contributed to them some fine ballads: *Glenfinlas*, for example, and *The Eve of St. John*. But the public would have none of it; some wicked wit christened it *Tales of Plunder*, and, indeed, he had levied toll right and left; the reviewers attacked it to a man, and it was soon 'laughed into Lethe.' His dramas, with the exception of this *Castle Spectre*, and an equestrian piece, called *Timour the Tartar*, seem never to have enjoyed more than a doubtful success, and were sometimes pretty severely handled. The manuscript of this particular play, it is said, Lewis first submitted to his sister, that she might expunge all such passages as appeared to her to offend either against religion or decorum! What labour this delicate revision entailed we are not told, but if the lady's censorship included offences against literary as well as moral propriety, it is clear her office can have been no sinecure. But the play was, as I have said, successful: it 'ran,' as the phrase goes, for upwards of sixty nights, and kept its place upon the stage up to a period within the memory of men still living. To Sheridan, indeed, who was then manager of Drury Lane, it proved for a time a very mine of gold. Every one remem-

bers the story of the dispute between him and Lewis, which the latter offered to clench by betting all that his play had brought into the manager's exchequer. 'No, no,' was the answer, 'that is too large a sum to risk on such a trifle; but I will bet you what it is worth.' So fearful, indeed, of the result was Sheridan, whose own high genius and correct taste could not fathom the dark profound of the popular mind, that he implored Lewis to 'keep the spectre out of the last scene.' Lewis refused, and, as events proved, very wisely refused. 'Never,' he wrote in the preface to the published edition of the play, 'was any poor *soul* so ill-used as *Evelina's*, previous to presenting herself before the audience. The friends to whom 'I read my drama, the manager to whom I presented it, and the actors who were to perform 'in it, all combined to persecute my 'spectre,' 'and requested me to confine my ghost to the 'green-room. Aware that without her, my catastrophe would closely resemble that of the *Grecian Daughter*, I resolved upon retaining her. The 'event justified my obstinacy. The 'spectre' was 'as well treated before the curtain as she had 'been ill-used behind it; and, as she continues 'to make her appearance nightly with increased 'applause, I think myself under great obligations 'to her and her representative.'

Indeed, with the exceptions I have mentioned, Lewis' success as a dramatist was not equal to his

perseverance. An opera called *Adelmorn the Outlaw*, for all that Kelly's music, and the acting of Charles Kemble and Mrs. Jordan could do for it, never took the public fancy. *Alfonso, King of Castile*, a tragedy in blank verse, fell still more flat, though the cast included George Frederick Cooke, and the author himself allowed that the acting could not have been better. In his preface to this, the most ambitious of all his works, Lewis condescended to make an appeal to his critics. 'To the assertion that my play is stupid,' he wrote, 'I have nothing to object; if it be found so, even so let it be said. But if, as was most falsely asserted of *Adelmorn*, any anonymous writer should advance that my tragedy is immoral, I expect him to prove his assertions by quoting the objectionable passages.' Whether the objections thus anticipated were ever made, or, if made, were made in the form prescribed, I am not aware; but his biographer is careful to specify it as the most moral of all his works, and if any of my readers should feel at all anxious on the subject (for I hardly like to recommend them the play itself, not out of regard to their morals so much as their time and patience) they may satisfy their curiosity easily and pleasantly with one of the early numbers of *The Edinburgh Review*,* wherein no less a personage than Sydney Smith himself has taken Alfonso in

* For 1803.

hand. 'We confess,' is the critic's comment on the author's assertion of innocence, 'we have been highly delighted with these symptoms of re-turning, or perhaps nascent purity in the mind of Mr. Lewis, a delight somewhat impaired, to be sure, at the opening of the play, by the following explanation which Ottilla gives of her early rising——' and he goes on to quote the lines in question, which are certainly written in what it was once the fashion to term a glowing style, and are perhaps not likely to reassure a reader of very tender morals. However, there is really no harm in it; and, indeed, according to the critic, there is much that is really good in it. He says, 'there is some good poetry scattered up and down, and some strong painting, which shows every now and then the hand of a master.' One is sorry, of course, to disagree with so eminent a man on any subject, but it is, to say the least, a style of painting which has gone a little out of fashion to day. However, everyone will certainly agree with his explanation of the ill-success which it experienced on the stage, the want of nature in the characters, and of probability and good arrangement in the incidents—*objections*, as he drily remarks, *of some force*.

But to go seriously through Lewis's plays would be sheer waste of time. The most that can be said of them is, that they show a fair amount of what is technically known as *knowledge of the stage*.

Moore, writing when Lewis was at the height of his theatrical reputation, to a friend minded to try his fortune as a dramatist, recommends Lewis as likely to be of great service to him. 'No one,' he says, 'knows the inside of a theatre so well as Lewis.' It is obvious, however, that to 'know the inside of a theatre' is not the only knowledge necessary for a writer of plays, though there can be no doubt that, taking the words in a *personal* sense, such knowledge constitutes a very important element of theatrical success to day. In originality, in characterisation, in the nature of his incidents, and the fitness of his language, Lewis was as deficient as any farce-writer of to-day. Had he not in short been the man he was—of good birth, of good position, of independent means, and notorious as the author of *The Monk*—it is very doubtful whether any of his work would have ever got beyond the manager's room. *Alfonso* was acted, not at Drury Lane, but at Covent Garden, owing to some quarrel with Sheridan; and in a letter written to his mother a few days after the first performance, he tells her, 'For what reason I know not, but Mr. Harris (the Manager of Covent Garden) has taken all of a sudden a fancy for everything I do. . . . "Anything that you choose to be brought forward," said he, "shall be produced immediately."' Precisely so; and is it not pretty much the same to-day? If Mr. Bradlaugh, for example, or any other similar candidate

for notoriety, were to take to writing plays, what chance would Shakespeare's self have against him with the managers, even though he should revisit these glimpses of the moon with another *Othello*?

Yet let us say what we can for poor Lewis. There was in him, despite his many follies and grave offences against good taste, something—a strange fantastic vein of imagination—which went to redeem him from absolute contempt; and his occasional verses, though forgotten now, were at their best easy, spirited, and flowing. By far the most notable of his works—the only one, indeed, that posterity has suffered with patience—was his *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, published after his first visit to Jamaica. In this he described scenes and people strange to most Englishmen, and of interest then to all, with much fancy, observation, and humour. Though Scott says he was 'fonder of great people than he should have been,' and Byron has confirmed this censure with a ridiculous story of his behaviour at Oatlands, yet Lewis was certainly a favourite with society; he was always gay, cheerful, and amiable, qualities which, added to his birth and fortune, contributed, one may suppose, among the people he was so fond of, not a little to his 'literary' fame.

It is true then that in his day he made some noise in London, but his day was a short one, and he himself lived to see its close. Though

comparatively a young man when he died—he had just reached his forty-second year—he had yet survived his fame. ‘Few men,’ wrote Moore, who knew him well, ‘once so talked of, have ever produced so little sensation by their death.’ He died on shipboard, in the Gulf of Florida, on his homeward voyage for the second time from his West Indian plantations; and Byron wrote his epitaph in that jingling couplet which more, perhaps, than any line he himself had ever penned, has kept his memory green—

‘I would give many a sugar-cane
Mat Lewis were alive again.’

THE OLD COMEDY.

It is a difficult task, of course, to fit the old comedies to our modern stage, but I cannot quite go along with those who hold it to be impossible. Even with the most practicable of them it requires indeed a nice hand and a correct judgment to remove all offences, without at the same time removing all the wit and humour, the grace and the movement, which must surely still charm even those minds which can find no attraction in such bright and busy pictures of men and manners. It is not that their wit, to gather all their merits together under one head, lies in their indecency and coarseness; but it so often takes such questionable shapes, that the superficial reader is apt to confound the soul with the body, failing to detect the animating essence beneath the gross exterior that overlays, but is not necessarily of it. Just as with many of the Elizabethan writers, Lily, Sidney, Raleigh, even Spenser—fine and noble thoughts are so often

buried almost beyond discovery beneath a fantastic covering of language, so beneath the gross and often brutal indecency of Congreve and his school, the many sound qualities of their work are apt, perhaps, to be a little passed over.

On some of their work, no doubt, the labour of a thousand Bowdlers would be but labour in vain. The *Pain Dealer* of Wycherley, for example, and the *Old Bachelor* of Congreve; and one might have added the *Country Wife* of Wycherley, had we not recently been reminded how neatly the cunning hand of Garrick has touched this very play. But of the others, Farquhar, stands pre-eminently forward as the one who offers the fairest field to those who cannot find their account in modern comedy. Second in merit, though the last in time, of the famous four we speak of as the comic dramatists of the Restoration, Farquhar, matched with his own contemporaries, is comparatively pure. Partly this arose, no doubt, from his own temperament, which was gentler and more genial than the temperament of such men as Wycherley, or Congreve; and partly because he wrote at a time when the age had begun to grow a little tired—and a little, perhaps, ashamed of the unblushing coarseness of the Restoration. The pendulum had swung back. The Revolution of 1688 had gradually cleared the atmosphere of many things besides, which were not, as the apostle James says, convenient.

The ferocious satire and the ferocious humour of the L'Estranges and the D'Urfeys shrank away in the presence of such gentler natures as Addison and Arbuthnot. The *Spectator* took the place of the *Observer* ; and Dryden

‘worn with cares and age,
And just abandoning the ungrateful stage,’

confessed—as none but Dryden then were great enough to dare confess—that in too many things Collier had taxed him justly. There is more good nature, more real gaiety in Farquhar's plays, than in those of the others. He makes us laugh, in Hazlitt's words, *from pleasure oftener than from malice*. Of the four, then, he is by far the easiest to manage to a modern audience not squeamishly determined to take offence, as, indeed, to do them justice, audiences are very little determined to-day. Lamb's theory, that morals should not count in what is ‘altogether a speculative scene of things, which has no reference whatever to the world that is,’ hardly needed the mighty weaver's beam of Macaulay to shatter it ; to pretend, as a silly writer of our own day has pretended, that even Farquhar was not the man ‘to raise a blush upon a modest cheek,’ is of course sheer affectation. There is considerable truth, no doubt, in the reason that Goethe gave for the strength and directness of Molière's work ; that when he wrote ‘girls were in the convent, and he

was not forced to think about them.' 'What business,' he asks, 'have our young girls at the theatre? They do not belong to it. . . . the theatre is only for men and women, who know something of human affairs.' But we have no convents, and we have girls, and theatres too, in plenty. Moreover, the affairs of which Congreve and his school treated might too often be called *inhuman* rather than human; what they were their own age knew well enough, when

'The Fair sat panting at a courtier's play,
And not a Mask went unimprov'd away.'

Certainly one would be very sorry to find society now suffering these plays in their completeness; but too squeamish I think we need not be. Even at its worst this sort of writing is surely less really powerful for harm than such nauseous stuff as *La Dame aux Camelias*, and much other work of the modern French school, which we welcome so greedily to-day.

Of the seven plays Farquhar has left us, three have still kept their places upon the stage; *The Inconstant*, *The Beaux Stratagem*, and *The Recruiting Officer*. The last of these has not, I think, been seen since the days of Charles Kemble; but the other two have been seen in our own day. *The Inconstant* was played five years ago at the theatre of the Westminster Aquarium, and two years later *The Beaux Stratagem* was revived at

the same place. *The Inconstant* was not very successful. The principal part was played by an actor who too plainly had no knowledge of the spirit of Farquhar's age, and who unfortunately added to his misconception of Young Mirabel certain native peculiarities of speech and manner which could not but be fatal to any character demanding the quality of distinction. And as this one character pervades and dominates the play more after the fashion of modern play-writing than of the balanced and harmonious composition of the old school, the best achievements in other respects, had they been forthcoming, could hardly have compensated for failure in this. But in truth *The Inconstant*, despite the famous episode of the 'red Burgundy,' is not itself a very notable piece of work. It is but a copy of Fletcher's *Wild-goose Chase*, and, like most copies, inferior to its model. As Leigh Hunt has truly said, it is neither more nor less than Fletcher's play with all the poetry taken out—'the age of the demi-gods of Elizabeth brought down to the standard of the sprightly parade officers of the times of Captains Vanbrugh and Farquhar.' Charming comrades in the park or the tavern are those officers, but they cannot stand beside the demi-gods!

But *The Beaux Stratagem* is another matter. This is the best of Farquhar's work. *The Recruiting Officer* runs it very close, indeed; but,

though with perhaps as much gaiety and freshness, this has less firmness, less assurance than the other. The success of *The Recruiting Officer*, one feels, strengthened his hand; he wrote his last play, though he wrote in sickness and poverty, like one confident in the public and himself. And what a play it is! how full of life and spirits! what gaiety and invention in the plot! what animation and variety in the characters! what ease, brightness, and resource in the language! For audacity and effect the final scene between Mrs. Sullen and her sottish husband has no parallel save in that incomparable one between the two sisters in Congreve's *Love for Love*. Scrub is surely a lineal descendant of Potpan and his fellows!

The version used at the Westminster Theatre was, on the whole, a rational version enough. There was perhaps a little too much interference. In all such work the first and last thing to be borne in mind is this, to do no more than is absolutely essential. In removing and toning-down, the reviser did little to be complained of. He took away certain scenes, but he managed to do so without damaging the progress or coherence of the plot; and his concessions to the proprieties were no more, perhaps, than they must have been. The two dangerous scenes between Archer and Mrs. Sullen were very happily tided over, and they were played moreover with very good

tact. But there were certain arbitrary transpositions of speeches which served no purpose, and could be set down only to that fatal itch to be doing from which the hand of the reviser seems doomed to suffer. One may take it as a rule that those men knew their business, to say the least, as well as we do; and when we find a speech in one place we may be pretty sure they could have given a better reason for its being there than we can give for its being somewhere else. One or two speeches, moreover, were omitted that had better have been kept—notably a witty speech from Archer about ‘poor Jack Generous,’ in the dialogue between him and Aimwell on the scandal of poverty, and also the exposition of his philosophy in the same scene, ‘those are the most miserable wights in being,’ &c.; both good and characteristic speeches. And if the scene in which Mrs. Sullen contrives that her husband shall find the French Count at her feet was to be omitted, it would surely have been as well to omit too all reference to the plan. But perhaps one was most disposed to find fault with the additions to the dialogue, which were surely something more than superfluous. These made their appearance, as may be guessed, mostly in those scenes in which Scrub bore a part, and were obviously intended, heaven save the mark, to heighten the humour! I do not know, however, that the reviser was himself responsible for

these untoward specimens of revision. It is quite possible that they had crept into the text by degrees, furnished by successive generations of Scrubs; for it is a custom, as we know, coeval with our stage, that those who 'play your clowns should speak more than is set down for them.' There are, no doubt, many writers on whom a ready actor could extemporise with advantage; but they are, I think, mostly of a later date than George Farquhar.

And the acting, too, was for the most part creditable. If there was nothing specially brilliant about it, it may be said to have 'served;' to have served perhaps better than one could have expected. I propose later on to deal generally with the style of acting convenient to the true presentation of the old comedy, so I will not stay long over it here. But nothing could, in our present circumstances, well have been livelier or more engaging, more properly coquettish and whimsical, than were Miss Litton and Miss Meyrick as Mrs. Sullen and Dorinda; while Mr. Farren as Archer acted better, perhaps, than he has ever acted before. Certainly he was gayer and lighter than he has ever been before, and he had the humour of the part at his fingers' ends; which may be said, too, of Mr. Everill's Boniface. When he kept to the words that Farquhar had written for Scrub, Mr. Brough was extremely comical. One could have wished no-

thing better than his air of ineffable stupidity as he recounted to the ladies his knowledge of the mysterious stranger, or than his manner when he revealed to Archer the horrid plot about 'a count, a closet, a back-door, and a key.' But when he left Farquhar for the effusions of a modern genius, then he pleased me at least less, and made me laugh not at all. Then he ceased to be Scrub, and became Mr. Brough, as one has so often seen him in those terrible burlesques which have done so much to spoil many a good actor. Mr. Bannister—a famous name—played Foigard, the Irish priest, and mixed the brogue and the broken French cunningly enough. This part, however, might have been clipped considerably; the virtue has rather gone out of the character since Farquhar drew it, when he was a real man enough, and a dangerous. If Mr. Edgar and Mr. Bellew could have changed places, the play would not have suffered; what disfigured Aimwell would not have disfigured Gibbett, and I have seen Mr. Bellew play a fine gentleman very well.

Yet the play did not seem to please. It may be that these excursions from the beaten path of our theatre must be taken by players more in the vogue than these, perhaps, were, and at a house more in the vogue. It may be, too, since that avalanche of decoration under which the Bancroft's buried the *School for Scandal*, when

they revived it at the Prince of Wales' Theatre some nine years or so ago, that we have come to associate the old comedy with more lavish displays of upholstery and millinery than the management of the Westminster Theatre very sensibly thought fit to give. Fashion rules our theatre to-day, as it rules the court and the camp, and all other places over which the poet once assigned the sole dominion to love ; and fashion has never yet set its face towards the theatre in Westminster. But what the cause I know not ; enough, that the play seemed to interest but little, and was soon withdrawn to make way for Colman's *Poor Gentleman*.

From *The Beaux Stratagem* to *The Poor Gentleman*, from Farquhar to Coleman, is a descent indeed ! To be sure *The Poor Gentleman* is a very superior piece of work to that other of the writer's plays, *The Iron Chest*, which Mr. Irving revived the other day ; but what a poor figure its strained and often vulgar humour, its tawdry sentiment, cut beside the wit and vivacity of Farquhar's play ! Indeed from the evidence his writings furnish it is rather difficult to appreciate the brilliant and versatile wit for which contemporary record has marked the younger Coleman. 'Let me begin the evening with Sheridan, and finish it with Coleman,' wrote Byron in his journal ; 'Sheridan was a Grenadier company of Life Guards. Coleman a whole regiment—of light

infantry, to be sure, but still a regiment !' And Mrs. Charles Mathews, in her memoirs of her husband, the elder Charles, tells us how 'Coleman perfectly broke Sheridan down by the force of his vivacity !' Certainly it is not very easy for us now to understand how the author of *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal* could go down before the author of *John Bull* and *The Poor Gentleman*. However, Byron's opinions were, as we all know, of no Parthian fixity ; and indeed he elsewhere records that he had seen Sheridan 'annihilate' Colman. We may suspect, too, remembering the habits of the time, that those who began the evening with Sheridan might not always have been capable of a very critical estimate of the finish.

Still, *The Poor Gentleman*, with all its faults, is a good stage play enough ; and, by reason of those very faults, perhaps more likely to attract and amuse us to-day, than more intellectual and refined work. Work such as Farquhar and his contemporaries gave, to really satisfy, demands a certain niceness and intelligence of appreciation in the audience, which experience forbids us to expect will invariably be found in our audiences to-day. 'The greatness of the poet,' said Goethe, talking to his friend Eckermann of theatrical writing, 'is by no means the important matter. On the contrary, one who is little elevated above the general public may often gain

the most general favour precisely on that account.' The buffoonery of some of Colman's scenes, the buffoonery, as perhaps, one should rather say, which can be contrived from some of his scenes, is pretty sure to provoke laughter, and is, let us allow, good enough of its kind. All the lighter scenes, in short, act well if they are in the hands of capable actors, while the heaviness of the graver passages is frequently relieved, if the expression may serve, by some familiar claptrap of sentiment which is always sure of a cheer from the gallery. And, which is perhaps the strongest argument in its favour, Colman's play is so much easier to act than Farquhar's; partly from being so much nearer our own time, and partly because humour, whatever its degree, is so much easier to express than wit. The farcical vulgarities of Ollapod, the more fashionable vulgarities of the Honourable Lucretia McTab, the whimsical affectations of old Bramble, the blunt humours of his trusty old servant; even the commonplace virtues of Emily and her father, are all so much more easy to represent, than are the airs, and graces, the wit and the audacity of Farquhar's characters.

'Mediocrity,' says Lessing, 'always fares better with the actors;' and so Colman's play fared better than Farquhar's. Indeed there was hardly a character in it which was not after its kind well played. Parts of Mr. Brough's Ollapod

could hardly, I think, have been better. His scene in the second act with Miss McTab, played to the life by Mrs. Stirling, was a most diverting scene of genuine comedy; his aside, as he set a chair for the old lady, 'a charming chair to bleed in,' could not have been more naturally or more pointedly given. If Mr. Brough was always like this, always content to act the character as his author intends it to be acted, he need fear in his line no rival on the stage. Mr. Everill, as the blunt but most confoundedly honest old servant, was no less good; though his character, if left alone, plays itself, to use the cant term, much better than does Ollapod. It was Mr. Everill's praise that he left it alone, doing with it neither more or less than he should have done. Mr. Farren, always good with the old men of the old comedy, and, as his Archer shewed, able at times to play the young ones with equal skill, was excellently suited with the part of old Bramble; while Mr. Edgar's sobriety, which is apt sometimes to verge on dullness, found a natural outlet in the character of Worthington. Mr. Bellew and Miss Meyrick played the young people very pleasantly; and Mr. Bannister, as Stephen Harrowby, the ambitious bumpkin, carried on the good impression of his Foigard.

Nothing very notable was done in this way for some time after, till in the early days of

last year, Miss Litton—who has been of late a prime mover in this good work—commenced a series of morning performances of Old Comedy at the Gaiety. Of these the first, *The Country Girl*, Garrick's version of Wycherley's *Country Wife*, was by far the best, and was perhaps as spirited and felicitous a presentation of its kind as our later stage has seen.

Of all the works of its school, *The Country Wife* of Wycherley's is probably the most shameless. Like his *Gentleman Dancing-Master*, it owes much to Molière's *L'Ecole des Femmes*, though he could hardly have seen the latter acted, for his French travels were over in 1660, and Molière's play was not brought on the stage till 1662. Though inferior in substance and finish to *The Plain Dealer*—in which the influence of the great Frenchman may also be traced—and containing no one character of equal humour to the inimitable Widow Blackacre, yet with all its indecency, it is perhaps the only one of its school that has successfully survived the process of theatric galvanisation. But then, the operator was Garrick! a man who looked at his work from both sides, as a theatrical manager, and as a man of taste and letters. Certainly the operation was performed with wonderful skill and success. The Fidgets, Squeamishes, Horners, all that shameless brood of Belial, were swept clean away, and, by the simple expedient of con-

verting a wife into a ward, the process of purification was completed! Nor has the operation, as such operations generally have, proved fatal to the patient. Much indeed of the wit has gone, and not a little of the bustle, vivacity, and colour of life and manners. But enough still remains to keep the work sweet, and, if the wit has flown, there is still abundance of humour. What Garrick did, in short, resembles less the practice of the modern doctor than that usage of ancient pharmacy which Medea induced the daughters of Pelias to apply to their venerable sire, but with a happier result. His version was first placed on the stage in 1766, and since that time has occupied a respectable place among the classics of our theatre. Its most notable triumph was in 1785, when Mrs. Jordan first took the town by storm in the character of Peggy, the Mrs. Pinchwife of the original; and Leigh Hunt, writing many years after her death, has recalled in a warm, if somewhat inelegant, rapture of memory, the delightful way in which she would come dancing on the stage at forty, *a girl still in spite of her fat!* The version used by Miss Litton was in all essentials the work of Garrick; but it had been compressed into three acts and refined still further to the modern taste, though, indeed, there was but little in it which could seriously have offended even the nicest idea.

Miss Litton herself played the part of Peggy,

and played it with excellent sense and spirit. But she was not *vulgar* enough—a rare failing indeed upon our stage! She wanted vulgarity—natural vulgarity; which is to say, of course, vulgarity *natural to the part*, and not to the actress. Peggy was no Lady Teazle, even before that lady's elevation to Sir Peter's side. She was a little awkward, silly, country bumpkinet, scarce able to write or read, or to do anything but 'dangle her arms, look gawky, turn her toes in, and talk broad Hampshire.' Now, Miss Litton went as near to this as she could, but it is not quite in her nature to catch the exact quality of the Prues and the Hoydens. The more refined the wit, the better always will she express it. She has, one feels as one watches her, a nicer appreciation of wit than humour, and even of humour a nicer appreciation than of broad fun—of which last element there is a considerable mixture in Miss Peggy and her doings. Miss Litton looked as charming as could be in her boy's clothes, but not in the least *loutish*. Yet she played the scene with such spirit, and the scene itself (perhaps the cleverest bit of Garrick's work, seeing what the original is!) is such a comical *imbroglio*, that every one was delighted. And after all, perhaps there are Peggys and Peggys: who shall pretend peremptorily to define a character of which the cleverest of us can form only an ideal standard? This, let us own, was a

very engaging and a very amusing Peggy, and I, at least, should be greatly puzzled to know where to look for a better. When I say then that I, for my part, am inclined to prefer Miss Litton's fine ladies to her country girls—that she is more successful, to my mind, in catching the sparkle of the one than the jollity of the other, she will, I am sure, understand me to exalt the former rather than disparage the latter.

But about Mr. Everill's Sparkish one had need to make no reservations; it was admirable throughout. The air with which he uttered his fatuous impertinences; his walk, his gestures, his look—all hit off to the life the silly coxcomb who lost his mistress through his own blind vanity and presumption. And Mr. Farren was a good Moody, though perhaps not quite surly enough. He was suspicious and ill-tempered, but rather hard than surly; yet surliness is certainly a quality of Pinchwife, and should, I take it, be one of Moody. Of the rest, Miss Harris as Lucy was most notable, expressing in very good spirit the ready mischievous wit of the London-bred Abigail. The play was very well furnished—by no means a common feature of morning performances at the Gaiety Theatre, for which a most depressingly bare and dingy stage seems generally to be thought good enough; and the dresses very smart, and correct enough, no doubt. I must confess, however, to have been a little

doubtful of Harcourt's hat and Belleville's coat. If these were right, certainly Sparkish was wrong, which one can hardly suppose of so fastidious a beau. A small point, to be sure; yet dress, it must be remembered, goes now-a-days for a good deal in these plays.

The last essay in this so fruitful and so neglected field, has been the revival of *The School for Scandal* at the Vaudeville. I cannot, for my part, quite go along with all the praise that has been showered on this performance, praise which seems indeed to have been largely stimulated by the lavish display of old furniture and new dresses. There can be, as I have elsewhere said, a little too much of this, and there was, I think, a little too much of it at the Vaudeville; certainly there was a little too much stress laid upon it. Such things will, of course, always count for much in modern presentations of this old life; will, no doubt, help to realise it for us, and through our eyes train, as it were, our minds to the changed atmosphere of society. But they should never seem to oppress and cumber the proper business of the moment, to efface the play itself. The barest scene, filled with a company of players who understand and appreciate their work, will outweigh all the upholsterer's shops in London. And in other respects, too, the performance seemed to me to be one rather of negative than

positive excellence. There was nothing in it, perhaps, which offended, but there was also nothing which greatly stimulated or attracted. There was no feature in it, for example, comparable to the Joseph Surface of Mr. Clayton, in the revival which took place at the same theatre some nine or ten years ago; or to the Charles Surface of Mr. Coghlan, which distinguished the later revival at the Prince of Wales'.

But I will not be ungrateful. After so much of the modern substitute for comedy our theatre has to suffer, a spell of Sheridan is truly refreshing. Indeed, in every representation of his work, there must be always much that is interesting; indirectly, for the work's sake, if not for the literal value of the representation. And about this there was so much at least, that the actors, one and all, seemed themselves so interested in their work, which is certainly one of the most salutary qualities a theatrical performance of any class can have. They did not go about their business in that languid perfunctory manner that one so often sees in our theatres—which, indeed, seeing what the nature of that business so often is, may surely move rather our pity than indignation. These on the contrary were full of life, energy, seriousness, all such admirable qualities in a theatre, as in real life; these forces were not perhaps always directed to quite the right end,

got on a wrong tack sometimes, and were a little wasted; but they were there.

The chief defect of the performance, as of most others of its class, was its want of *style*, of *distinction*. Even Mr. Farren, who has often shown himself by no means deficient in this quality, and whom I have seen play this very part in far better spirit, even he seemed to be a little hampered, a little influenced by his surroundings; and though there was plenty of earnestness and feeling in his Sir Peter, there was none, or almost none, of the old courtliness and breeding. Indeed, his manner with Lady Teazle, in the famous scene of that so short-lived reconciliation, might sometimes more properly have belonged to the lady's old admirer, Sir Tivy Terrier, than to Sir Peter Teazle. Mr. Lin Rayne, whose idea of Sir Benjamin Backbite, in the old days at the Prince of Wales', was a very happy one, has brought that idea rather too much now into the regions of burlesque; and the Careless of Mr. Crawford, with plenty of vivacity and good temper, was a little too much after the modern school of animal spirits. Perhaps the most correctly played of all the parts, so far as this particular quality is concerned, was the Trip of Mr. Lestocq, which was an excellent imitation, as such a servant, in such a house, would give of the master's style. And this naturally made the absence of such style in the master more noticeable.

In many ways Mr. Neville's Charles Surface is a clever performance, but it has always failed where Mr. Coghlan's so notably succeeded. Leigh Hunt once said of an actor, eminent for his grace and distinction, that 'he played on the top of his profession like a plume.' And of Mr. Coghlan, in this part, at least, one may well say the same. I remember to have heard the late Charles Matthews say, while watching Mr. Coghlan in this character, 'There is Charles Surface!' And *there* was praise! For though few of us, perhaps, can recall that incomparable actor at his best, yet poor indeed must be the imagination which could not, even from the Sir Charles Coldstream and the young Wilding of his later day, form some idea of that enchanting prime. Indeed it is hard to imagine that Smith, the original Charles, or 'Gentleman' Lewis, or even Charles Kemble himself, could have shown more of the *bel air* than did Mr. Coghlan, could—and this is not the least essential part of the matter—have worn that brilliant dress more becomingly. But with Mr. Neville this is not quite so. He plays the part much, as by reading Lamb's description, one would imagine John Kemble to have played it—that is, *seriously*. And Kemble's playing of the part was in its way, Lamb says, extremely effective. So is Mr. Neville's: he has not the qualities of lightness or grace, nor is his humour very copious or easy. But he has earnest-

ness and feeling—the latter, perhaps, rather leaning towards the sentimental—and these are powers which can be used very effectively in playing Charles. For there is a strong infusion of sentimentality in Sheridan's play. His heart, one cannot doubt it, was with the older school—the school of pure comedy. But the fashion of his day prescribed a vein of that sentimental comedy, which Steele brought in to check the license of the Restoration wits, and which, though it died hard, received its death-blow from Foote and Goldsmith. In Charles's praises of generosity, and in his refusal to part with his uncle's picture; in the character of Maria—how different from the Dorindas and Cynthias of the earlier men! Nay, even in the characters of Joseph and Lady Teazle are manifest incongruities, at which Congreve and his school would first have stared and then have sneered. And this incongruity is still further pointed by that curious usage of our stage, which, at the fall of the fatal screen, sends off Charles—the benevolent, tender-hearted Charles!—in a boisterous fit of raillery at Sir Peter, who, in his turn, is commonly more sorrowful and less angry than he should be. Sheridan, who, we may be very sure, was keenly alive to the weak points of his play, sends him off much more quietly: but we must improve, of course, on Sheridan! This side of Charles's character—the serious and sentimental side—Mr. Neville brings out very

well ; and the pointed, witty dialogue he delivers well, too, as understanding and appreciating it. But the lightness, the grace, the gaiety with which Mr. Coghlan coloured the part, Mr. Neville has not.

The Lady Teazle of Miss Cavendish was strong and weak in the same points. Into the famous catastrophe she threw plenty of feeling and strength, was eloquent, earnest, affecting ; but the Lady Teazle of the earlier scenes she could not touch. Of all the characters in the play it is to this one, perhaps, that the style is most necessary, and must be most marked ; and for this reason, that it is not native to her, but assumed. Lady Teazle was a fine lady, but she was not a *gentlewoman*—two very different things. Till the supreme moment, when fright and shame have fairly sobered her, she would never lose sight of her airs and graces ; and these would be a little over done, as not coming naturally, but by imitation and practice. She would imitate them very well, of course, for a woman is always handier in such things than a man ; but still the imitation would be patent to one skilled in the real manner. Now Miss Cavendish's imitation was patent, certainly, but it struck one, perhaps, rather as an involuntary than a voluntary imitation : as an imitation rather by the actress than by the character. She was too melodramatic, a little too much of the tragedy-queen. She lacked ease, warmth, pliancy ; and she has not by nature been

bountifully gifted with the quality of humour ; her gaiety is always a little hard and thin, and the restless, almost feverish assumption of spirits with which she strove to mask these defects, really only brought them into greater prominence. Yet she was a picturesque and striking figure, and those parts of the character that she was able to cope with, she managed with very good effect.

Of the other characters there is less to say ; but of the Joseph of Mr. Archer one must say this : clever actor as Mr. Archer has so often shown himself to be, this character, at least, he has entirely failed to realise. He could make of it no more than a cold, hard, canting hypocrite, who could scarcely have imposed on the credulity of a child, and who would assuredly have never won his way into the favour of such a butterfly as Lady Teazle. He has none of the insinuation, the grace of the true Joseph ; none of the self-satisfaction, the conscious, yet secret pleasure in his villainy, qualities which also belong to the character, and which Mr. Clayton brought out so well, realising, as it seemed to me, beyond all actors I have ever seen in the part, that famous Joseph, of whom Lamb has left us so masterly a portrait.

The chief defect of the performance, I have said, was its want of *style*, of *distinction*. It is this want, I have also said, which tells, in a greater or less degree, against all our presentations of the old comedy ; for indeed, without this, all such

work must be, to borrow a French metaphor, like a pretty woman with one eye. Without it, whatever the sum of the actor's professional skill, his work can never be more than a *caput mortuum*. In the comedy of manners we must have the manners. 'In turning over the pages of the best comedies,' writes Hazlitt, 'we are almost transported to another world, and escape from this dull age to one that was all life, and whim, and mirth, and humour.' And he goes on: 'What an air breathes from the name! what a rustling of silks and waving of plumes! what a sparkling of diamond earrings and shoe-buckles! What bright eyes, what killing looks and graceful motions! How the faces of the whole ring are dressed in smiles! How the *réparties* goes round! How wit and folly, elegance, and awkward imitation of it, set one another off!' With how delicate, how caressing a hand, too, has Lamb touched in his picture of this same brilliant, brazen 'Utopia of gallantry!' No man knew this comedy more thoroughly than Lamb and Hazlitt, none savoured it more keenly; they had caught, moreover, the last sparkle of the diamonds, the last flutter of the plumes, before they with their witty, wicked wearers vanished into dust and darkness. All that has ever been written on the subject shows how essential to the proper playing of this comedy is the spirit I speak of, the *grand style*—if I may apply that much abused phrase to

social uses—that *bel air*, which, like the bloom of flowers on a grave, overlaid with so bright and gracious show the unlovely mass of corruption beneath. But, indeed, one need not call Lamb or Hazlitt to witness; the plays themselves are evidence sufficient for any competent judge. It runs through all the school, from the highest to the lowest, from the houses of Legend and Fashion to the Jeremys and Flippantas, from the houses of Absolute and Surface to the Lucys and the Trips; they must all have it, the elegance itself, or the awkward imitation, each after his kind, and in his proper degree.

Now, this is precisely what so few of our actors have; as old Legend, in the best play of the best writer of the school, says of his sailor-son Ben, ‘they have parts, but they want polish.’ It is only in reason, perhaps, that this should in some measure be so, nor would one wish to press too hardly on the actor who fails to catch the essence of a character which he has never been able to study in the original, and which indeed the spectator can only himself perhaps, to use a once popular phrase, evolve out of his inner consciousness. Difficult it must always be to present with perfect accuracy the manner and style of an age so remote and so widely different from our own; to assume with the dress the proper air and quality of the past. And indeed what they really were we can, after all,

but guess. From generation to generation, too, they varied, even as our manners to-day are neither the manners of our fathers, nor of our sons. Dryden, we know, complained of the want of breeding in the fine gentlemen from whom Congreve and Farquhar took the very beaux who are our admiration and our despair to-day, and sighed amid the wits and templars of Wills' for the Wilmots and Sheffields of his prime. Chesterfield, it is not impossible, may in secret have shrugged his dainty shoulders at the old-world airs of Bolingbroke; while that splendid Alcibiades, so splendid even in his shame, though the 'morals of the whore' would have troubled him little, might well have been at one with Johnson on the 'manners of the dancing-master.' After all, then, perhaps we can only clearly see that this unknown quality must have been something altogether different from that we recognise as of and belonging to our own contemporaries. So, when we see a Sir Plume more obviously skilled in the nice conduct of a cigarette-case and an umbrella than of an amber snuff-box or a clouded cane; when we see Belinda, correct and magnificent in powder, patches, and brocade, but charming with the airs and graces of the latter half of the nineteenth century, we feel intuitively that all is not right;

'Though art's hid causes are not found,
All is not sweet, all is not sound.'

Yet, venial as the fault may be so far as the players are concerned, it is a fatal one to the play. It is indeed this danger which has always seemed to me a stronger argument for leaving these old comedies in the study than the moral danger. It were better to learn from the printed page the wit and gaiety of the dialogue, and the humour of the scenes, to form one's notion of the men and women who spoke and acted thus, than to hear and see them presented to us in a manner we know, whatever else we do not know, cannot be the true one. In part the desired quality will come, no doubt, from some natural gift; in part from correct training in that most necessary course of an actor's education, the proper bearing and movement of the body. But in part also it is an intellectual gift, born of a proper understanding of the spirit of the age; arising from a study not only of the printed text, but of the men who wrote it, and the men of whom it was written. It must come, in short, from what, as Mr. Burnand has so truly said, in words I have elsewhere quoted, the actor needs as much as any, and has less of than most—it must come from *education*.

THE NEW COMEDY.

Robertson's plays have been so long with us, have been so frequently discussed, and evoked such copious and constant applause, that it may seem, perhaps, at first hardly worth while now to busy ourselves very seriously either to confirm the public voice or to deny it. Yet, such work as *Caste, Ours, School*, and so forth, is really the only work to which one could point—if there was any desire to do such a thing—as the representative school of modern comedy. No doubt Mr. Byron, with his good-tempered melodramatic sort of farces, has had his vogue; has it still, indeed, with a large proportion of playgoers; and so too had that unwearying band of translators, or adaptors, of the modern French comedy. Nevertheless, Robertson's work has worn, I think, better than either of these. Of the others, 'immoment toys,' even the most successful, when its course was once run, has rarely suffered a

second birth ; but the characters he drew now nearly twenty years ago, Naomi Tighe, Beau Farintosh, Eccles, Captain Hawtree, and the rest, are still familiar figures in our theatric gallery. Perhaps they are losing now a little of their freshness ; perhaps one is a little inclined to wonder now, as one watches them at their old familiar work, whether they were ever in truth such engaging and important personages as we at first declared them to be.

‘ So round and round the ghosts of beauty glide,
And haunt the places where their honour died.’

But they exist still ; their vitality, if not quite so joyous and attractive as it once was, endures still ; and their influence is still a power, if not quite a power of the first class. For the last ten years or more Robertson has been the acknowledged model for all our young wooers of the comic Muse. A little falling off in the allegiance may now, I think, be discerned, perhaps because the results were generally so very disheartening. But what is now should never make us quite forget what has been. In the last quarter of a century Robertson is certainly the most important figure among our play-writers, how much or little soever that may mean ; and as his heritage is shortly to become public property, is to pass away from the exclusive hands that have used it so long, and done so much with it, to the general service

of the theatre, it is perhaps as good a time as any to consider a little what his work has been, and what its influence—it hardly offers material enough to consider very curiously.

Robertson has suffered, no doubt, from being over-praised, as most things, and people too, are apt to suffer among us here in England, and in our theatres as much perhaps as anywhere. His plays came to us at a happy time, when the work of our stage was very scanty and valueless, and they fell upon good soil. They found a particularly well-graced and well-matched company of actors, quick at once to seize and accentuate their strength, to gloss over and conceal their weakness; and they found a public only too eager to snatch any way of escape from the intolerable deluge of folly which then was threatening to swamp the English stage. They must count, therefore, as effective agents in such theatrical reformation as our latter years have seen; they brought not only a clearer atmosphere and a cleaner life upon the stage, but they inaugurated also—for they necessitated—a more balanced and temperate style of acting. But alas, 'it was always the fault of us English, when we have a good thing, to make it too common.' On this good thing we thought we had found, not recognising, in our first transports of discovery, how its goodness counted rather by comparison than by any direct and native virtue—on this good thing

we went on refining and refining, till we rested at last on sheer nothingness; and filling up the places of life, and feeling, and action, with dresses, and furniture, and decorations, we came, with slow but inevitable steps, amid a chorus of mutual congratulations, back to the old era of

‘Cato’s long wig, flower’d gown, and lacquer’d chair.’

It was to a partial reaction against this flat and insipid state of things, that our theatre owed the crude imitations of nauseous French models which followed, and indeed at one time almost dethroned the Robertsonian school; but which, in its turn, and happily, we made again too common—too common, and one may say, too unclean.

All this, however, should be charged less to the inherent defects of the Robertsonian comedy than to our own indistinct notions of the consequences of things. Certainly the plays are not very solid or important work, but they did some good in their appointed time. The popular voice, when raised in favour of wholesome and seemly objects, must always count for something; and that voice has, no doubt, spoken strongly in favour of Robertson. Comedies indeed they can scarcely be called; as pictures of contemporary life, of manners, and humour, they are little worth. The mirror they hold up to the face of well-bred society is as cracked and distorting as that in which Racine reflected for the courtiers of the

Great Monarch the heroes of the Attic stage. One cannot indeed but look back with astonishment on the judgments which hailed these comedies as the comedies of *life*, of *society*. We talk of the vulgarity of French farces, of our own English burlesques; but what relief do we find here? Really, with all its cleverness, with all its titled characters, its pretty dresses and smart furniture, this school of comedy is but the antithesis to a once popular farce, *High Life Below Stairs*—it is not much more than *Low Life Above Stairs*! Its plots are slight and incompact; its wit strained and thin; its action trivial; its dialogue, when not turned aside altogether from the course of human speech, is but a literal transcript of that speech at its emptiest and most inconsequent moments. Such comedy is, indeed, no more than farce—polite farce, where the jokes must be cracked genteelly, and all the feelings of humanity toned down to the soft accompaniment of the drawing-room piano.

Hazlitt, writing of the scantiness and inefficiency of the Comedy of his day, sought to explain its weakness by the excellent quality and quantity of its predecessor. ‘Comedy,’ he says, ‘naturally wears itself out—destroys the very food on which it lives. . . . It is not the criticism which the public taste exercises upon the stage, but the criticism which the stage exercises upon public manners, that is fatal to

comedy, by rendering the subject-matter of it tame, correct, and spiritless.' There is some truth in this, no doubt, but not, I think, the whole truth. When he says, indeed, that the 'gross and palpable absurdities of modern manners are too shallow and barefaced, and those who affect are too little *serious* in them, to make them worth the detection of the Comic Muse,' he says, certainly, what is as true to-day as it was in the first quarter of the century. But when he goes on to maintain that, while possibly there may be as much folly in the world as ever, we contrive to *keep it more to ourselves* than did our fathers, I know not with what truth he may be speaking of his own age, but of ours, the theory I think, can hardly hold good. For my own part, I should rather be inclined to say that it is precisely *because* our follies are so very much with us to-day, that Comedy does not find in them so fruitful and attractive a field as once she did. So large a part of our periodical literature now deals with them, that they come on to the stage as it were at second hand. In the great days of comedy, the days of Congreve, there was no such antagonism; there was not even the *Spectator*. The Comic Muse had it all her own way; her hand alone it was that held the mirror up to Folly's face, and dared to let the Wildairs, and the Lurewells, the Olivias, the Froths, and the Plyants, see themselves as others saw them. But now, what with

‘Punch,’ and other journals professing to deal with the whims and vagaries of mankind, we are all so greatly busied with laughing at our neighbours, that the theatre coming, as it necessarily must come, so long after these red-hot records of the hour, can really offer not much more than a twice-told tale. One saw this, I think, in Mr. Burnand’s *Colonel*, one of the very few plays of late years that can be called, even by comparison, a comedy of manners. But the manners, the affectations which he satirised, had already afforded us all quite as much food for laughter, or disgust, as they were capable of supplying; and so, despite its extraordinary vogue, one can hardly, I think, accept it as a very important or satisfying illustration of modern comedy. It is our Periodical Press which has done more than any other growth of modern civilisation to cramp and narrow the stage, and perhaps more in the field of comedy than in any other.

Charles Lamb has also handled this subject, and he gets, it seems to me, much nearer the root of the matter than does Hazlitt. He complains that the artificial Comedy, or Comedy of manners, is quite extinct; the times cannot bear Congreve or Farquhar. And he asks the reason; ‘is it for a few wild speeches, an occasional licence of dialogue? I think not altogether.’ Then he goes on;—

‘We have been spoiled with—not sentimental

comedy—but a tyrant far more pernicious to our pleasures which has succeeded to it, the exclusive and all-devouring drama of common life; where the moral point is everything; where, instead of the fictitious half-believed personages of the stage (the phantoms of old comedy), we recognise ourselves, our brothers, aunts, kinsfolk, allies, patrons, enemies, the same as in life,—with an interest in what is going on so hearty and substantial, that we cannot afford our moral judgment, in its deepest and most vital results, to compromise or slumber for a moment. What is *t'iere* transacting, by no modification is made to affect us in any other manner than the same events or characters would do in our relationships of life. *We carry our fire-side concerns to the theatre with us.* We do not go thither, like our ancestors, to escape from the pressure of reality, so much as to confirm our experience of it; to make assurance double, and take a bond of fate.'

We carry our fire-side concerns to the theatre with us! This seems to me the very gist of the matter. Wearied with the stilted artificial style, as we called it, of the old school, for which such work as *Money* may stand as representative, tired with the buffooneries of the farce-writers, and the witless gods and goddesses of burlesque, we cried out for nature, for men and women as they really were. Then Robertson came; the

man and the moment, and he gave us—nature! What that nature was I need be at no pains to point out. We all remember it—the cooking of the famous pudding in the Crimean hut, the two young lovers philandering by moonlight over the milk-jug, and so on; the nature of Wordsworth as seen by the authors of *Rejected Addresses*,

‘ Papa, he’s my Papa and Jack’s,
Bought me last week a doll of wax,
And Br ther Jack a top ’

‘ It is the business of Art,’ wrote Goldsmith, ‘ to imitate Nature, but not with a servile pencil.’ And Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his first discourse to the Royal Academy, has a passage of the same tendency on the pre-Raffaellite manner in painting. ‘ On the sight of the Capella Sistina, he (Raffaelle) immediately, from a dry, Gothic, and even insipid manner, which attends to *the minute accidental discriminations of particular objects*, assumed that grand style of painting, which improves partial representation by the general and invariable ideas of nature.’ Congreve again, in answer to an objection that his characters were wittier than nature, said, that if the conversation of the two wittiest men that ever lived was taken down literally at shorthand, it would make but a poor show upon the stage. I will take a scene from Congreve; the scene between Ben and his father, old Sir Sampson Legend, and Mrs. Frail, in *Love for Love*. Ben has just come home from

sea, and there is a plan in the family to marry him to Miss Prue, a silly little country girl.

Sir Sampson. Thou hast been many a weary league, Ben, since I saw thee.

Ben. Ey, ey, been ! been far enough, an' that be all—well, father, and how do all at home ? how does brother Dick, and brother Val ?

Sir Samp. Dick ! body o' me, Dick has been dead these two years ! I writ you word when you were at Leghorn.

Ben. Mess, that's true ; marry, I had forgot. Dick's dead, as you say. Well, and how ?—I have many questions to ask you. Well, you ben't married again, father, be you ?

Sir Samp. No, I intend you shall marry, Ben ; I would not marry for thy sake.

Ben. Nay, what does that signify ? An' you marry again—why, then, I'll go to sea again, so there's one for t'other, an' that be all. Pray don't let me be your hindrance ; e'en marry a' God's name, an' the wind sit that way. Or for my part, mayhap, I have no mind to marry.

Mrs. Frail. That would be a pity, such a handsome young gentleman.

Ben. Handsome ! he ! he ! he ! nay, forsooth, an' you be for joking, I'll joke with you ; for I love my jest, an' the ship were sinking, as we say'n at sea. But I'll tell you why I don't much stand toward matrimony. I love to roam about from port to port, and from land to land. I could never abide to be port-bound, as we call it ; now, a man that is married has, as it were, d'ye see, his feet in the bilboes, and mayhap mayn't get 'em out again when he would.

Sir Samp. Ben's a wag.

Ben. A man that is married, d'ye see, is no more

like another man than a galley-slave is like one of us free sailors; he is chained to an oar all his life; and mayhap forced to tug a leaky vessel into the bargain.

Sir Samp. A very wag! Ben's a very wag! only a little rough, he wants a little polishing.

I will not go on, though the whole scene is admirable, and so is the one which follows, where Ben and Prue are left alone together. Let us now turn to a scene from the new comedy, from Robertson. I took the best of Congreve's plays to quote from, so I will take the best of Robertson's. I will take *Caste*; the scene where Polly Eccles meets Captain Hawtree for the first time. George d'Alroy has come to pay his court to Esther, and brought his friend with him to see how pretty a sweetheart he has got. It is tea-time, and while the lovers are busy with their own affairs, Polly and Captain Hawtree set out the table.

Polly. Hallo, Mr. D'Alroy! how de do? Oh, I'm tired to death. Kept at rehearsal by an old fool of a stage-manager. But stage-managers are always old fools, except when they are young ones. We shan't have time for any dinner, so I've brought something for tea—ham. (*She sees Hawtree.*) Oh! I beg your pardon, Sir, I didn't see you.

Geo. A friend of mine, Mary. Captain Hawtree, Miss Mary Eccles.

Haw. Charmed.

Polly. (*Aside.*) What a swell! got nice teeth, and he knows it. (*Takes off bonnet and shawl—a*

pause.) How quiet we all are ; let's talk of something.

Esther. What can we talk about ?

Polly. Anything. (*Puts ham from paper on to plate.*) Ham. Mr. D'Alroy, do you like ham ?

Geo. I adore her. (*Polly litters.*) I mean I adore it.

Polly. (*To Hawtree, placing tea-board on table.*) Do you like ham, Sir ?

Haw. Yes.

Polly. Now that is very strange. I should have thought you'd have been above ham.

Haw. May one ask why ?

Polly. You look above it. You look quite equal to tongue—glazed. (*Laughing*) Mr. D'Alroy is here so often that he knows our ways. (*Getting tea-things from sideboard and placing them on table.*)

Haw. I like everything that is piquante, and fresh, and pretty, and agreeable.

Polly. (*Laying table all the time for tea.*) Ah ! you mean that for me. (*Curtseying.*) Oh ! (*sings.*) Tra, la la, la, la, la. (*Flourishes cup in his face : he retreats a step.*) Now I must put the kettle on. (*George and Esther are at window.*) Esther never does any work when Mr. D'Alroy is here. They're spooning ; ugly word spooning. isn't it ?—reminds one of red-currant jam—at the first taste sweet, and afterwards shuddery. Do you ever spoon ?

Haw. I should like to at this moment.

Polly. No, you're too grand for me. There's too much of you for me. You want taking down a peg—I mean a toot. Let's see, what are you, a corporal ?

Haw. Captain.

Polly. I prefer corporal. See here. Let's change

about. You be corporal, it'll do you good, and I'll be my lady.

Haw. Pleasure.

Polly. You must call me my lady, though, or you shan't have any ham.

Haw. Certainly, my lady; but I cannot accept your hospitality, for I'm engaged to dine.

Polly. At what time?

Haw. Seven.

Polly. Seven! why that's half past tea-time. Now, Corporal, you must wait on me.

Haw. As the pages did of old.

Polly. My lady.

Haw. My lady.

Polly. Here's the kettle, Corporal; take it into the back-kitchen. (*Holding out kettle at arm's length. He looks at it through eye-glass.*)

Haw. Eh!

Polly. I'm coming too.

Haw. Ah! that alters the case. (*He takes kettle-handle between finger and thumb.*)

Geo. What are you about?

Haw. I'm about to fill the kettle. (*Holding it out at arm's length. Polly throws herself into a chair and roars with laughter.*)

Here, with these roars of laughter in our ears, we will stop. In which scene Nature has the advantage I will not pretend to decide; but every one, I think, will see, that the Art, at least, of Congreve, has certainly a little the best of it with the *fire-side concerns* of Robertson's.

This sudden and demonstrative affection for Nature, which does so much to destroy our

comedy to-day, may be seen too in another branch of theatrical writing—in the present mode of dealing with the pathetic. Into pure comedy the pathetic does not enter; in the old comedy Congreve's *Angelica* is, I think, the only character with any touch of human feeling. But in our present comedy, or what stands in its place, there is always a certain element of the serious and the sentimental. It may seem perhaps a somewhat infelicitous, not to say an impudent parallel, but our modern comedy turns rather to Shakespeare than Congreve, rather to *Much Ado About Nothing*, or *Twelfth Night*, than to *Love for Love* or *The Double Dealer*. And here, too, it is the same; here again the *fire-side concerns* come in, and we are asked to cry over them as we are asked to laugh. Nature, we are told, plain unvarnished Nature, is the only true source of tears as of laughter. Nature, indeed! but what Nature?

Now, perhaps, for the comical, the humorous, one should not attempt to lay down too Parthian a law. There are those whom the tickle of a feather can move to inextinguishable laughter; others to whom it is needful to administer a joke violently, to explain it categorically, to repeat it unvaryingly. But pathos has its own laws; it is a definable quality. There is, to be sure, a sort of minds which insists on misery, and calls by hard names those who will not be

driven into tears as nails are into a wall. But it is not the hearts of these good creatures that are soft, it is their heads. We had an instance of this only the other day in *Mimi*, that ill-starred child of Mr. Boucicault's old age; a still more pointed instance, perhaps, in *The Cape Mail*, that exquisite little flower of French sentiment, over which tears were so copiously shed in the St. James's Theatre last autumn. And what a tawdry, unreal affair it was! How the nature and reason of things were tortured out of all semblance to reality in order to 'unlock the sacred source of sympathetic tears.' A sacred source indeed! and until these Master Stephens of our stage learn that the source of real grief is sacred, they will never lay hand upon the golden keys. However, as I have elsewhere said, a soft heart, and a nature prone to sentiment, are in themselves such charming and amiable things, that no one would wish to mock those tender souls who are gifted, like Sir Hugh Evans, with 'a great dispositions to cry.' Let them cry on, by all means; but let there be no mistake in the source and quality of their tears; from the head they flow, not from the heart. In such thin theatric affectations as *Mimi* and *The Cape Mail* provide there is no real pathos; there is only *sentiment*. Now, between pathos and sentiment there is all the difference between Lear over the dead Cordelia and Sterne over the dead ass.

There must be always on the stage a certain risk in pathetic situations, for the 'illusion of the stage' is a thing so much more talked about than felt. Thus great effects are almost always reached by a single sentence ; a word sometimes, even a tone, a gesture. This is so, partly because the actors cannot keep themselves for any length of time to the proper pitch, partly because the spectators—except such melancholy souls as I have signified—cannot keep their feelings so long upon the rack for what they really know is after all but fictitious woe. Thus pathos, to be truly effective on the stage—to be truly effective, one might say, anywhere in fiction—should be always brief. And it should be always natural, spontaneous ; *it should be born, not made*. Brevity and naturalness are the essential qualities of pathos. When it lacks these two it becomes sentiment. The moment we begin to reason about it, the moment we begin to ask ourselves whether this could really have happened, to think if it would not rather have happened this other way or that, then we may know that pathos has left the scene and sentiment come on. To hunt in highways and byeways for a sigh, to exhaust nature and art for a tear, is the act only of the man who has no knowledge of, no feeling for, the real sorrows and sufferings of humanity. Even where one finds a true note of pathos struck, how often does it not lose half its effect;

become quickly lost by repetition? The nail is hammered again and again till the head is knocked awry and the point blunted. 'The Germans like sentiment,' wrote Schiller to Goethe, who has certainly given them a good deal of it; and the French have ever been past masters of it—they can shed tears, as Swift could have written finely, over a broomstick. To be sure a critic in one of our newspapers (*not the Daily Telegraph*) has recently discovered 'an exquisitely tender and beautiful passion' in *La Dame aux Camelias*, 'that sweetest of idylls,' as he calls it, declaring the famous death-scene to be 'an ecstatic agony *which is almost a transfiguration.*' Nevertheless, despite this high authority, I think for an illustration of true pathos I should hardly go to M. Dumas *fils*; hardly to any French or German writer, I think. Many things we can get from them which our own literature, no doubt, cannot supply; but for the dramatic effect of pathos, putting the ancients by, I should, for my part, rather turn to Shakespeare. I should turn to Hamlet with his

'The rest is silence;'

to Lear, with his

'Do not laugh at me;
For as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia;'

to Othello, with his

‘O Iago, the pity of it, Iago;’

to Antony, with his

‘O whither hast thou led me, Egypt?’

to Cleopatra herself, with her

‘Pity me, Charmian,

But do not speak to me.’

But I have travelled, perhaps, a little away from Robertson. He inaugurated, I have said, a new school of acting, as well as a new school of writing, and the original masters of that school, I added, were particularly skilful and well-graced exponents of the new method. But it has been with their followers as it has been with his; with both it is the weakness rather than the strength which has survived. Let us make all allowances for that common failing of humanity, which ever loves to complain, as Haydon complained to Wordsworth, that *the peaches are not so big now as they were in our days!* But the past of which I speak, is not yet so very far distant, that we need fear our judgments when they tell us, that the late revivals of these plays at the Haymarket Theatre have shown us this school of acting in its decadence rather than its prime. Neatness, they have shown us, but no strength; outline, but no colour; the equal balance, not of the full, but of the empty scales. The atmosphere of this theatre

reminds one of the enchanted island of the Lotos-eaters; *it seems always afternoon*. Has this arisen solely from natural causes? Do the laws of nature run counter in the theatre? Is it not the fittest who survive there, but the feeblest? Not so:

‘From harmony, from heavenly harmony,
This universal frame began.’

We have preached so lustily the doctrine of harmony, of equality, to our theatres; we have cried out so loudly and so continuously against ‘the bright particular star,’ and insisted that the second grave-digger should be as good in his way as Hamlet, and Trip as good as Charles Surface. It is indeed, an admirable doctrine; no better text could preacher desire for his theatrical sermon. But of this, as of all other human observations, the bearing, as Captain Bunsby would have said, lies in the application of it. If the level chosen is at the lowest and not the highest of the standard, it is obvious that the result will be, to say the least, a little disappointing. There is the level of the desert, and the level of the mountain-top. The latter is the noblest, the most invigorating, but the former is the easiest to attain. It is easier to pull down than to build up; and it is this theory, I have sometimes thought, while watching this clever company at their work, that has guided them in their search after harmony. When a new member is

admitted it seems as though, if Nature has not happily proportioned him to the general scale, he must be content to submit to a Procrustean operation, which may be irksome to the individual but is indispensable to the general good. That which is taken may possibly be of a finer quality than that which is left, but none the less must it go.

However, let us not be unjust; let us own the merits of this system, as freely as its faults. For merits certainly it has. The result is not perhaps all we could wish, but a result there is. As one watched this company, or almost the same company, at work on such pieces as *Money*, or *Plot and Passion*, one could not but recognise the admirable truth of that saying of Goethe's, 'He who is wise, puts aside all claims which may dissipate his attention, confines himself to one branch, and excels in that.' Compare their work in such pieces with their work in *School* and *Ours*, which we have all seen in the last year or two. How far more finished and effective was the latter! There the actors were on their own ground, the ground on which so many of them have been born and trained, on which they move with the assured step and easy carriage of proprietorship. No doubt they do suffer a little by comparison with their predecessors in the same demesne. They shrink, for instance, a little by the side of Mrs. Bancroft; whose Naomi Tighe and Mary Netley, even though the bloom be a little passed

from the alertness and gaiety of their earlier years, still remain to show after what fashion the true artist works, how inefficient soever the material; to show the vital difference between the natural and the imitative touch. No doubt the others a little emphasise the radical defect of this comedy, its thinness, its theatricalness; their extreme deliberation, their *gentility* a little over-accentuates the ineffectualness of the action, till one feels, that even so fresh and natural a process as the performance of a morning toilet in a Crimean hut is capable, after the thousandth time, of growing wearisome. Still, with all these trivial imperfections, it is impossible not to see how well these clever players have learnt their lesson, how well they suit the conditions of their school, with how nice a recognition of facts those conditions have been framed. Even Mrs. Langtry, whose experience of any school has necessarily as yet been slight, has been able to show how well she has profited by example and application, has been able—and this really is high praise for a novice—to move among her fellows as one to the manner born of Robertsonian comedy. Their work is, in short, an admirable argument in favour of those who believe that the real life of the theatre lies in the actor, and not in the dramatist. This is the popular, the fashionable creed to-day; it is not surely then, difficult to understand how gratefully

Robertson is relished by those who find Shakespeare long and Farquhar dull.

I have said that Robertson's work is not truly comedy but farce—polite farce. Yet as such no doubt it may take high rank, as the charades of Praed take in that order of verse. His plays are cheerful, good-natured, cleanly; above all—and therein has for the most part lain the secret of their endurance—they are capital *theatre-plays*. Robertson's criticism of human life was but small and shallow; but his criticism of theatric life, of the life of the theatre of his day, was certainly copious and accurate. It is possible that he could have produced different work and better had such been required of him. That which he did produce was found highly remunerative, and he was right after his kind in producing it. He saw what was wanted; he took the measure of his actors; and the measure too, one may say, of his audience; with the same accuracy that a good tailor applies to the clothing of his customers. He suited his company, and his company suited him, and both deserve the praise which belongs to those who do as well as they can that which they have set themselves to do. But it is right that what they did should be clearly understood. It should not be held up to future ages and dramatists yet unborn as a model of what English comedy, and the acting of English comedy, should be. It is neither the

one nor the other. Tea and bread-and-butter are excellent and salutary things in their way, but one is apt to turn against them when they are praised for being burgundy and venison. By all means let Robertson's plays enter on a new lease of life at the Haymarket or elsewhere, and let them go on being played, as we have been accustomed to see them played, to crowded houses every night. Their place might well be filled by much worse entertainments. But let us see them, in their strength and in their weakness, as they really are, and let us praise them, where we can, rather for the former than the latter. Let those who can rest their souls in satisfaction on such comedy as this do so by all means, but let them do so for their own reasons and after their own fashion. To require of these simple minds, as has been required of them by more eruptive natures, to find in such 'fire-side concerns' *subtle charms* and *piquancies* and *irresistible fascinations*, is as ridiculous, to borrow an illustration from Mr. Du Maurier, as to ask mankind to find in the eccentric behaviour of Mother Hubbard's dog a *precious meaning*, and an *abiding pathos* in the legend of Jack and Jill.

A SCHOOL OF DRAMATIC ART.*

MORE than once in the course of this little book I have expressed myself indebted to an essay of Mr. Matthew Arnold's, and in my chapter on the past year's work, I said, that I should have occasion later on to examine it somewhat more closely. It is the one on 'The French Play in London,' first published in the *Nineteenth Century Magazine* during the visit of the Comedie Française to our stage in the summer of 1879, and now included in his latest volume.† Its republication comes at a particularly happy time now, when there is again some talk of establishing here in England an institution analogous to the famous House of

* This Essay was written before the meeting held last month in the Lyceum Theatre to discuss the design and prospects of this School. I have not learnt, however, that any sufficiently definite result was then reached to make me add to or alter what I had previously written.

† *Irish Essays, and others*, by Mathew Arnold. Smith, Elder & Co. 1882.

Molière, or as analogous, at least, as the difference of our national temperament and notions of public economy will allow. From time to time, now for many years, there has been, to be sure, a good deal of talk upon this subject, more or less desultory and impracticable; but a desire for something more than talk seems at last likely to prevail. A committee has been formed, and a prospectus issued. The former comprises the names of men, and women, too, of all degrees of rank and note. The latter is brief and to the point, especially to that most vital point, the provision of the necessary funds. Englishmen are, indeed, so fond of forming committees; prospectuses

‘On wings of wind come flying all abroad’

at every conceivable opportunity, and for every conceivable purpose, that one would hardly like as yet perhaps to say that there was a chance of the thing being brought to a practical issue; but the *chances* of such a consummation there does really seem at last a desire seriously to estimate. To Mr. Arnold's views, then, on the subject we naturally turn again at such a time with renewed attention. And besides their seasonableness of utterance, besides the value and interest that Mr. Arnold's utterances must always have, they have, it seems to me, this special importance, that they are the views of one standing

wholly without the small and jealous circle of the theatre; coming to the consideration of his subject with a mind fresh, independent, and impartial, not harassed and disgusted by perpetual contact with all the ineptitude and vulgarity that so largely rule the modern stage; moreover, and above all, of one speaking with his natural voice, not checked and modulated by personal interest, or personal likes and dislikes.

But for this very reason we shall no doubt be told that Mr. Arnold has no claim to be heard on the subject, that he has no *locus standi*, cannot in reason know what he is writing about, and so forth. For it is one of the favourite dogmas of the theatre, that no one should be allowed to pronounce any opinion on plays or players, save those directly and personally concerned with them. Intelligence, reading, a cultivated taste, a nice judgment, a general knowledge, in short, of the meaning and fitness of things, count for nothing, unless the possessor of these incidental qualities is also, as the phrase runs, 'familiar with stage affairs.' A curious theory indeed! and very curious sometimes are the shifts to which the supporters of this theory are put. But the other day our newspapers afforded a remarkable instance in point, when Mr. Lewis Carroll—*clarum et delectabile nomen*—wrote to the *St. James's Gazette* on this very subject, the education of the stage, pointing out how badly, with all its energy and

vogue, even the best work of our theatres was marred and rendered void by the want of proper training, of a proper and recognised standard of right and wrong among our actors. His letter was just and amiable, two qualities which are not always found together in English criticism. But he was immediately taken to task by the *Evening Standard*,* and told that, as 'an outsider and an amateur,' his letter would not commend itself to those 'familiar with stage affairs.' And he was further bidden to go and see the comic opera of *Patience* at the Savoy theatre, and *Romeo and Juliet* at the Lyceum theatre, and to learn therefrom how 'the best of all dramatic schools is the Stage.' 'English players,' this astonishing writer went on, 'have not won their fame by studying in a Dramatic School, and such an institution would be unlikely to do good, for the reason that the leading performers have not time, if they have inclination, to teach; and mediocre professors would make mediocre pupils.' The darkness of infatuation is here so dense that it seems well-nigh hopeless to attempt to dispel it. *English players have not won their fame by studying in a Dramatic School!* Verily, as Gloucester says, 'and that's

*. I do not know what literary connection there may be between the evening and the morning paper of this name; but in the latter theatrical matters are as a rule treated with so much intelligence and sanity, that I can scarcely suppose any very close bond of union to exist, in this department at any rate.

true, too.' Is it possible to conceive a more infelicitous illustration of the argument that no such school is needed?

But let us, over the mangled corpse of poor Mr. 'Carroll,' try and consider the subject with a little more reason and a little less self-satisfaction.

It may be said, of course—indeed, it is said, I know, by many people of intelligence and sensibility—that there is after all no necessity, no real place or desire for such an establishment as this proposed school. They say that our theatre is at present in a very prosperous and lively condition, amply capable of satisfying those minds so constituted as to be able to take their pleasure in it; that it is a question, in short, of the man and the hour; those who still care for the theatre have precisely the theatre they care for; while those who no longer care for it, have ceased to do so because they have convinced themselves of the inutility, the hopelessness of all plans to restore it to the condition of a serious and rational entertainment. And perhaps one can hardly wonder much at such a view, however one may be disposed to regret it. For when we consider how small a topic of interest it is at present able to present, the theatre and its affairs are perhaps a little too much with us; we get, I sometimes think, a little too much of the atmosphere of the footlights imported into our common day. It is, one cannot but feel, a slight almost upon one's sanity to

be asked to accept seriously such a rodomontade as this, which I lately came across in Mr. Percy Fitzgerald's *New History of the English Stage*, 'Our actors and actresses have they not done much in forming our manners, our character, and in illustrating our magnificent literature?' or this, 'the long line of famous men and women, which stretches from Betterton to Mr. Irving, from Mrs. Anne Marshall to Miss Ellen Terry, contains names all Englishmen must be proud of having recorded in the history of the intellectual development of our country.' 'Praise in due measure and discreet is well,' says Agamemnon: but this is, perhaps, protesting a little too much. And really it is so hard, too, upon our actors, who cannot, one would think, but feel conscious that they are in some danger of becoming ridiculous through such very well-meaning, but rather indiscreet admiration. It is such foolish talking as this, together with other things connected with the interior economy of our theatres, which are not altogether, as one may say, convenient, and of which we hear a great deal too much, that tends rather, as one can well understand, to turn people of sobriety and intelligence away from the theatre, to render them indifferent to its future, and, perhaps, also a little blind to its possibilities of a future. But though we may not all of us be quite inclined to go along with the *Evening Standard*, and to admit that in such work as our *Patience* and our *Romeo*

and *Juliet*, we may find a state of things in which we should be content to rest in perfect satisfaction ; yet we may be no wit more willing to range ourselves wholly and without any reserve on the other side. For my own poor part, I certainly am not willing, but would rather wish to try if a balance may not be struck between the two—between the pessimists and the optimists—which shall enable us to arrive, not to-day, perhaps, nor to-morrow, but in time, at that great and essential consummation, to which Mr. Arnold is never wearied of calling us : *the seeing of things in reason and as they really are.*

Let us admit then to the full all that can in honesty be set to the account of existing things. Let us admit the prosperity and liveliness of our theatre, the lavishness and cordiality with which it offers all it has to give, the sagacity of those who are satisfied with the gift to abide in their satisfaction and want no more. Let us admit, too, the value of much of the material with which our stage works ; the native intelligence and vivacity of many of our actors ; the liberality, the energy—nay, even the perception of some of our managers. Let us admit all this, I say, for surely the ‘ everlasting nay ’ of querulous discontent is to the full as sterile and obstructive as the ‘ everlasting yea ’ of self-satisfaction.

But, as I would say to the optimists, granted that all is as you say ; granted that at the Savoy

and the Lyceum we may find the dramatic art of England at its highest and best; were it not perhaps, better still to strive to make that highest yet higher, that best yet better, than to sit with folded hands, to 'wonder with a foolish face of praise,' asking each other, in the words of a once famous politician, 'whether, the world over, or in past history, there is anything like it?' A wish to improve is not necessarily the sign of a splenetic or carping spirit. Let us rather remember what Shakespeare has said, in words which I have quoted elsewhere on the same subject,

'Security
Is mortal's chiefest enemy.'

So would I say to the others, the pessimists; granted that you find, and justly find much to disgust you in the present condition of our theatre, and in the infatuated complacency with which those 'familiar with stage affairs' talk of its state of unrivalled happiness and splendour; still, might it be not worth while to consider for a little the chances of improving this state of things, and of establishing once again in England a theatre in which men of seriousness and intelligence could find a rational and intellectual pleasure? In one shape or other the theatre will always exist among us, will always exercise a certain attraction, count for a certain power

among rich and civilised people. It were surely better, then, that the attraction and power, whatever the sum of their actual value may be, should be genial and salutary, rather than rude, ill-featured, and deterrent. And, indeed, when we consider what a part the theatre has played in former days among great nations and in stirring times, among the Athenians of Pericles and Phidias, among the Englishmen of Shakespeare and Bacon, among the Frenchmen of Molière, among the Germans of Goethe, one can hardly be content to acquiesce without a struggle in the contemptuous indifference with which modern culture seems agreed to regard it. Surely rather, as Mr. Arnold has said, 'every one of us is concerned to find a remedy for this melancholy state of things.' That it can ever again be all that it was in those times, and among those people, the inevitable change of things forbids; the spread of literature, for example, and, in consequence, of a 'little learning;' the spread of wealth and luxury, and the consequent necessity for longer hours of labour, for shorter, and more violent, more immediate pleasures. All the press and hurry, in short, of modern life forbid it; yet something other than it is, and better, it surely might and should be. When we consider, too, how large a part of our daily thought and conversation we give to such matters as Jumbo, Mr. Bradlaugh, Yalding Mysteries, Birmingham Frauds, and

other such trivial or unsavoury topics, it is surely no great hardship to turn for a moment to the contemplation of a subject which has, in all times and among all people hitherto, interested and amused the most cultivated and enlightened minds. At least, before we are agreed that nothing can be or need be done to improve a condition of things which we are, many of us, (if the *Evening Standard* will permit me to say so) agreed is eminently susceptible of improvement, let us look a little more carefully, a little less pedantically (as Goethe would have said) into the real causes of discontent. A knowledge of the patient's habits and general state of body is always necessary before the physician can decide on the nature and direction of his remedies.

Let us see then what Mr. Arnold has to say on the subject. We all of us, I suppose, still remember the headlong state of enthusiasm into which we rushed, in true British fashion, on the occasion of that famous visit of the French players in 1879; how the newspapers teemed with their performances, discussing them from every point of view, critical, biographical, social,—one might almost say, moral; how great ladies, in Mr. Arnold's words, seeking for soul, found it in Madame Sarah Bernhardt, and could not resist the desire of telling her so. Most of us, I say, can still remember all this, remember it

perhaps, some of us, with a certain sense of humiliation; and in part, no doubt, our present state of complacency is due to the inevitable reaction from this temporary effacement of ourselves and our works. But a passion of this kind, this *engouement* as the French call it, may, says Mr. Arnold, 'be salutary, if we will learn the lessons for us with which it is charged,' and that lesson is, he says this; 'The theatre is irresistible; organise the theatre!'

'We have,' he says 'in England everything to 'make us dissatisfied with the chaotic and ineffective condition into which our theatre has fallen. We have the remembrance of better 'things in the past and the element for the better 'things in the future. We have a splendid national 'drama of the Elizabethan age, and a later drama 'of 'the town' which has no lack of pieces conspicuous by their stage qualities, their vivacity and their 'talent, and interesting by their pictures of 'manners. We have had great actors. We have 'good actors not a few at the present moment. 'But we have been unlucky, as we so often are, 'in the work of organisation. In the essay of 'organisation which, in the patent theatres, with 'their exclusive privilege of acting Shakespeare, 'we formerly had, we find by no means an 'example, such as we have in the constitution of 'the French Theatre, of what a judicious man, 'seeking the good of the drama and of the public

'would naturally devise. We find rather such a
'machinery as might be devised by a man prone
'to stand in his own way, a man devoid of clear
'notions of the consequences of things. It was
'inevitable that the patent theatres should provoke
'discontent and attack. They were attacked, and
'their privilege fell. Still, to this essay, however
'imperfect, of a public organisation for the
'English theatre, our stage owes the days of
'power and greatness which it has enjoyed. So
'far as we have had a school of great actors, so
'far as our stage has had tradition, effect, con-
'sistency, and a hold on public esteem, it had
'them under the system of the privileged theatres.
'The system had its faults, and was abandoned ;
'but then, instead of devising a better plan of
'public organisation for the English theatre, we
'gladly took refuge in our favourite doctrines of
'the mischief of State interference, of the blessed-
'ness of leaving every man free to do as he likes,
'of the impertinence of presuming to check any
'man's natural taste for the pathos and pressing
'him to relish the sublime. We left the English
'theatre to take its chance. Its present impotence
'is the result.'

Then, for the remedy. 'It seems to me,' he says, in words I have before quoted, 'that every one of us is concerned to find a remedy for this melancholy state of things.' And he goes on,

'The pleasure we have had in the visit of the French company is barren, unless it leaves us with the impulse to mend the condition of our theatre, and with the lesson how alone it can be rationally attempted. 'Forget'—can we not hear these fine artists saying in an undertone to us, amidst their graceful compliments of adieu?—forget your clap-trap, and believe that the State, the nation in its collective and corporate character, does well to concern itself about an influence so important to national life and manners as the theatre. Form a company out of the materials ready to your hand in your many good actors or actors of promise. Give them a theatre at the West End. Let them have a grant from your Science and Art Department; let some intelligent and accomplished man, like our friend Mr. Pigott, your present Examiner of Plays, be joined to them as Commissioner from the Department, to see that the conditions of the grant are observed. Let the conditions of the grant be that a repertory is agreed upon, taken out of the works of Shakespeare and out of the volumes of the *Modern British Drama*, and that the pieces from the repertory are played a certain number of times in each season; as to new pieces, let your company use its discretion. Let a school of dramatic elocution and declamation be instituted in connection with your company. It may surprise you to

'hear that elocution and declamation are things
'to be taught and learnt, and do not come by
'nature; but it is so. Your best and most
'serious actors' (this is added with a smile)
'would have been better, if in their youth they
'had learnt elocution. These recommendations,
'you may think, are not very much; but, as your
'divine William says, they are enough; they will
'serve. Try them. When your institution in
'the West of London has become a success,
'plant a second of like kind, in the East. The
'people *will* have the theatre; then make it a
'good one. Let your two or three chief provin-
'cial towns institute, with municipal subsidy and
'co-operation, theatres such as you institute in
'the metropolis with State subsidy and co-opera-
'tion. So you will restore the English theatre.
'And then a modern drama of your own will
'also, probably, spring up amongst you, and you
'will not have to come to us for pieces like *Pink*
'*Dominoes*.'

An enchanting vision indeed! Only a vision, some perhaps will say, including, of course, the writer in the *Evening Standard*, who will hardly, I fear, allow it even to be enchanting. But how practical or ideal soever it may be, as formulated in Mr. Arnold's words, there can be no real doubt that this way, and this way only, must lie the restoration of the English theatre. Let us try and see then, where the practical lies in this

scheme and where the ideal, and by what means, if any, the two may be brought into harmony.

It is on this passage, if I may venture to do so, that I should be inclined to lay my finger as a weak point in Mr. Arnold's plan: 'Form a company out of the materials ready to your hand in your many good actors or actors of promise.' Here indeed I am afraid the dogged opponents of reform, the Philistines of our theatres, might with something like reason advance their favourite dogma, 'want of familiarity with stage affairs.' And this, not because of any difficulty in finding such actors, good, or of good promise. The quality of our actors does not perhaps touch quite so high a standard as in past years, so far as we can judge by report, but the quantity, and that, too, of a good average quality, is undoubtedly considerable. It is only in the natural course of things that this should be so, for demand will always up to a certain point create supply, and the extraordinary increase that recent years have seen in the number of our theatres has inevitably produced a corresponding increase in the number of more or less competent actors. Equally is it in the nature of things that their average of fitness should be a little less than that of their predecessors. These were trained on Shakespeare, and Otway, and Congreve, and Sheridan; those on Mr. Robertson, and Mr. Byron, and Mr. Wills, and Mr. Gilbert; and, excellent writers as

the latter, no doubt, in their way are, I hope I shall not offend if I say, that familiarity with their work can hardly inspire and promote quite so severe and intellectual a standard of acting, as will, as must indeed, familiarity with the older men. As Hazlitt has well said, 'The genius of Shakespeare does not shine out undiminished in the actor, yet we perceive certain effects and retractions of it in him *he stimulates the faculties of the actor more.*' No one, then, at all conversant with our theatres need be at any loss to draw up a list of a score of actors or more with which any school might be well content to start. But the real difficulty is, how to attract these actors to us? by what means, in plain words, are we to persuade them to come to school again?

For over and above the increase in the number of theatres, and the number of actors, we must also take into our consideration the even more remarkable increase in the number and richness of the prizes that now fall to the actors' share. One feels, of course, a certain disinclination to allude to so private and personal a matter, but inasmuch as some of our actors have not hesitated to inform us, with great frequency and minuteness, of their pecuniary triumphs, one may touch perhaps on the subject without any grave breach of courtesy. It is no secret, then, that in these days a successful manager will very possibly make in a

single season a sum far exceeding that which is likely to reward the lifetime of even a popular man of letters. Nor does he make this at the expense in any way of his company. The salary-list of one of our fashionable theatres might well make the spirits of the great managers of a thriftier and more serious day—the Cibbers, Garricks, and Kembles—to start from their graves. Even the veriest tyro, if all one hears be true, is now not unlikely to be rewarded on a scale which the most practised veteran of old would never have dreamed of. Cibber tells us that Mrs. Oldfield, by all accounts one of the most accomplished and charming actresses we have ever had, commenced her career at *fifteen shillings a week*! which was afterwards, as a particular favour, and on distinguished recommendation, raised to *twenty*! Even in the heyday of her fame, when allowed to make her own terms, she was content to make them at two hundred pounds a year, with a benefit. Yet only the other day we all heard, though I know not with what truth, of a novice commencing her theatrical career with the astounding salary of *eighty pounds a week*! What effect such exorbitant remuneration has had upon our theatre is not now the question. For our present purpose it is sufficient that the fact exists, and in the face of its existence so much, at least, of Mr. Arnold's scheme must fall, I fear, to the ground. For indeed what prospect

can we offer to these favourites of fortune that may hope to match their golden realities? Bressant, an actor of eminent abilities and long-enduring popularity, when he took leave of the French stage, received from the Comedie Française eighty thousand francs, his share of the fund set yearly aside for this purpose, and a retiring pension of eight or ten thousand francs a year. But even could our school be started on the same conditions as the famous House of Molière, what, one cannot but feel, would such future contingencies weigh, the reward of an industrious lifetime, when set in the balance against a novitiate of eighty pounds a week? 'It is not right,' wrote an ancient moralist, the gentlest and wisest of Pagans—'it is not right that anything of any other kind should come into competition with that which is rationally and politically good;' and another, nearer our own time, as gentle but scarce so wise, has sung 'the luxury of doing good.' Sweet and precious maxims! but alas! will they avail to-day against the worldlier wisdom of M. Jourdain's dancing-master, '*Mais cet encens ne fait pas vivre. Des louanges toutes pures ne mettent point un homme à son aise. Il y faut mêler du solide, et la meilleure façon de louer, c'est de louer avec les mains.*' Seriously, I fear such a sacrifice can hardly in reason be demanded of poor human nature, of theatrical human nature above all, for how indeed can that

man be expected to efface himself for the sake of a posterity to which he and his work must be alike unknown?

And there is this reason, too. When M. Jourdain's mocking wife asked him if he had not better go to school again, and be whipped at his age, he answered, 'Would I were whipped this very instant before all the world, so I did but know what they learned at school!' But with what assurance can we ask our actors to come to school now in the very heyday of their fame, even though that fame has confessedly been won in defiance of all teaching? Bolingbroke, to be sure, has said, in his stately style, that 'the most knowing man in the course of the longest life, will always have much to learn, and the wisest and best much to improve;' but it is one thing, as we all know, to pen wise sayings in the sweet Utopia of one's study, and another to put them into rigid practice amid the opposing forces of the world. With what assurance can we ask these prosperous and assured artists to forget all the triumphs of a long and splendid career, to put by all those engaging and individual peculiarities which endear them so to their followers, and are indeed, with the most part of the public, the mainspring of the actor's fame—how, I repeat, can we ask them to do all this, and place themselves now, at the eleventh hour, under the ferule of the schoolmaster, in order

that a generation which shall haply know not Joseph even by name may enjoy 'an ampler ether and diviner air?' One can imagine them smiling in happy knowledge of their position and its strength, smiling and making answer: 'My dear Sir, you who desire that we shall all look at things as they really are, suppose that you take for once a leaf out of your own book. Perhaps you may not think us great actors; perhaps we are not so good in all respects as the newspapers tell us, and as we are naturally pleased to believe. Perhaps this one of us does not know how to deliver the verse of Shakespeare correctly, perhaps that one does not bear himself with much grace; here may be one who is too violent, there one who is too languid. But consider, it is thus that we have risen into favour, and are what we are. With all these imperfections on our heads, which you so obligingly offer to correct, we have long enjoyed the breath of public applause, and reaped many a golden harvest; with reason, or without reason, we have long enjoyed these blessings, and long we hope to enjoy them. Shall 'all the ripe fruit of threescore years be blighted in a day?' shall we fling all these treasures to the wind, and become again as little children, knowing good and evil only at the dictation of one Sir Oracle, or Gamaliel be he, or Theudas?' And really, when one considers the full significance of the words, 'we are what

we are,' it would perhaps be difficult to find an answer.

No; we must look elsewhere for the materials of our ideal company. And here it is, as it seems to me, that the committee of the proposed school have done so wisely, in recognising this fact, and in abstaining from any attempt to interfere with what is already current and recognised as Dramatic Art. In the opening sentences of their prospectus they say, 'It is strongly felt that there is a daily increasing necessity in this country for an institution where a complete dramatic training in all its branches may be obtained at a moderate cost by those who wish to adopt the stage as a profession.' This necessity it is proposed to meet by a school, where 'the study of the English language and Dramatic literature, Elocution, Fencing, Dancing, and the rudiments and correct pronunciation of French will be taught.' There is to be a 'Dramatic Board of Direction,' (here, the text seems to me, I must own, a little ambiguous) 'and of these a certain number will be paid instructors.' Then as to the provision of funds. 'The Committee,' we are told, 'have carefully considered the scheme, and are of opinion that it would be inexpedient to take any steps towards establishing the school until they have satisfied themselves that the movement would be supported to an extent sufficient to defray the cost of the experiment for at least four

years. This, it is calculated, will cost about £6,000; but against it may be put the fees to be paid by the students, which it is hoped may eventually be sufficient to render the institution self-supporting.' No mention here, it will be seen, of a grant from the Science and Art Department; no anticipation, expressed at least, of any support from the State. Whether or no they nourish in their secret hearts any hopes of ultimately securing such support, at least one cannot doubt their wisdom in keeping silence for the present. It is so long since the theatre has been regarded with any seriousness as a national institution among us, in a sense one may say, indeed, even as a public institution, that it would certainly have to be made clear that there existed not only a fixed and rational purpose to make it worthy of such regard, but also some substantial probability of doing so, before the State could with propriety be asked to interfere. Of course, too, the very splendid successes which, if we are to believe the managers and the newspapers, now everywhere attend theatrical enterprise, would naturally tend to make against an appeal *ad misericordiam*, with a Government not perhaps disposed to be lavish just at present in the cause of art, and indeed, as we must allow, having so many other things to think about, more vital, if less attractive—a Government, too, one must remember, numbering amongst its members so

staunch a supporter of the doctrines of self-reliance and self-help as Professor Fawcett. But if the public, such of them as are well and seriously disposed towards the movement, are assured of its earnestness and right direction, one feels that there should not be any very great difficulty in raising the necessary funds. When, at the close of the seventeenth century, the patentees of Drury Lane, by their arrogance and illiberality, drove the best of their company, with Betterton at their head, into open revolt, 'Many people of quality,' Cibber tells us, 'came into a voluntary subscription of twenty, and some of forty guineas a-piece, for erecting a theatre within the walls of the tennis-court in Lincoln's Inn Fields.' To be sure, the 'people of quality' then had need for few misgivings on the score of their 'money's worth,' with Congreve to write plays for them, and Betterton and Booth, Mrs. Bracegirdle and Mrs. Barry to act. Still, a glance at any daily paper will serve to show that with all our faults we are not an illiberal people, nor wont to starve our pleasure at least—as the number and magnificence of the subscription list to the Royal College of Music show clearly enough, to say nothing of the sums so spontaneously offered for the redemption of Jumbo. So I think the problem of funds—a vital one certainly—should not be very difficult of solution; provided always, let me say again, that it is made clear and certain that

the money asked for will really serve the cause, and will not go to make but another drop in the already overflowing tide of the theatrical Pactolus.

But, when the money is gathered in, there remains yet another question, which, for my part, I cannot but think most difficult of all to answer. Pupils the school should hardly lack. Mr. Irving told us the other day in his famous effusion at Edinburgh, how thick and fast recruits are pouring in to the theatre; still more recently there appeared in the *St. James's Gazette* a letter to the same effect from one who appears to have joined the ranks some little time ago, complaining, indeed, that in the present press of competition, there was scarce room to live, much less to do. But the teachers? the instructors in the English language, in declamation and elocution?

I said a little while back that we could not in reason expect the actors who have already won a name and a position on the stage, and the still more solid advantages which spring therefrom, to forego all these things, and put themselves to school again. In many ways it would be no doubt an excellent thing for them,—as, indeed, for all of us it would be, whatever our age, degree, or occupation,—if they could do so and would; but it is not in reason to expect it. Yet from their ranks it is clear that the teachers must come—the teachers in *the English language, in declamation,*

and elocution. For although one sees upon the list of the general committee many names of rank and social distinction, whose sympathy with the art Mr. Arnold has himself declared to be 'precious and refining,' and whose sympathy with the art and artists of the stage is understood to be particularly cordial and sincere, although one sees these names, I say, and sees them with such pleasure, yet one recognises, of course, that they are to be regarded mostly in the light of what grammarians call an *Epitheton ornans*. One is not, I say, at all disposed to cavil at this; but rather to congratulate oneself, remembering the words of our friend the Dancing-master—he speaks so to the point that Dancing-master! 'Il est vrai qu'il les connoît mal, mais il les paye bien; et c'est de quoi maintenant nos arts ont plus besoin que de toute autre chose!' No; clearly it is from the men 'familiar with stage affairs,' from the workers themselves, that the instruction must come, and at this point, I must confess, my mind begins to be a little 'clouded with a doubt.' In dancing and fencing, those most useful branches of the theatrical art; in singing and in speaking French with a tolerable degree, at least, of correctness, I make no doubt the most competent teachers could be found; but in the English language, in declamation, elocution?

In the May number of the *Nineteenth Century*

Magazine there was a short paper by Mr. Burnand on this very question, in answer to one in the previous number, in which Mr. Hamilton Aïdé (to whom indeed, the movement mainly owes such vitality and substance as it has at present got) expounded the designs of the school, and pleaded its cause in a very lucid and practical manner. Mr. Burnand is so inveterate a jester, that he falls a little short of Mr. Aïdé in lucidity, and it is not always easy, or I, at least, do not find it always easy, to know when he is serious and when he has his robes of office on; but he aims at being even more practical than Mr. Aïdé. In one respect he seems, I am glad to think, to go along with me, in a doubt as to the particular quarter whence our instructors are to be drawn. 'Over how many of our theatres,' he asks, 'could be written *Ici on parle Anglais?*' So far I am with him most cordially. How true, too, and sensible is this: 'A thoroughly good education is the best basis for an actor, who has to hold the mirror up to nature. All require this, whatever profession or calling they are going to adopt; but the actor above all others; and, as a rule, he has less of it than most others.' But then he goes on: 'I doubt whether the very few actors who can speak blank verse could impart to others what they themselves have acquired from their only instructors—study, practice, and an acquired knowledge of stage effect. *A clever, experienced prompter,*

or good stage-manager, could give all the necessary hints without fettering the pupil with a master's mannerism during the rehearsals.' Here, in the sentence I have italicised, it seems to me that Mr. Burnand makes, if I may say so, rather a sudden descent from the platform of common-sense on which he commenced; unless, indeed, this should be only his jocular method of showing at how small a value he is inclined to set the speaking of blank verse. It is true, indeed, that a thoroughly sound education, provided, of course, that it embraces those matters with which the theatre works, will be of the greatest service to the actor in the delivery of blank verse, or, indeed, of any serious form of language; it is true that the actor who has enjoyed such an education, and been able to profit by it, will have mastered the greater part of his task; for what is the essential principle of correct speaking but the correct understanding of the truth and beauty, of the real significance of the words spoken? and how is this to be got but by the study of true and beautiful words, by a *thoroughly sound education*. 'I never till now,' says Mr. Arnold—that is till he had seen Mdlle. Bernhardt—'I never till now comprehended how much of Rachel's superiority was purely in intellectual power, how eminently this power counts in the actor's art as in all art.' Without this power, all the training in the world will never enable an actor really to satisfy his audience when

dealing with fine thoughts and noble language, whether cast in the form of poetry or not ; without the impress of the speaker's own intelligence, of his own understanding and appreciation, the finest speaking in the world, the justest emphasis, the most melodious cadences, will be after all but a *caput mortuum* ; indeed, without this, one might almost say, there can be no fine speaking, no justness of emphasis, no melody of cadence. Still, it is no less true, that to make the very best of this intellectual power some training is indispensable, some practice and experience, some study in a good school, and under good masters. To speak well from any platform this must be necessary, and from the platform of the stage above all others, where so many extraneous and retarding influences are at work. And I must confess I am at a loss to know how Mr. Burnand can admit so much in one breath, and in the next suggest that the necessary training can be supplied by a *clever, experienced prompter, or good stag-manager*. My knowledge of these most useful officials is certainly much less intimate and practical than his must be ; yet, when I reflect in what schools the cleverest of our prompters, the best of our stage-managers have been acquiring their capacities for teaching, I am really at a loss to reconcile these two utterances.

Again, Mr. Burnand suggests that the best school for the young actor will be a well-

conducted theatre, in which he could be 'rehearsed by the prompter in whatever pieces are running at the time,' and^b he instances three theatres: the Lyceum, the St. James's, and the Haymarket. Now, certainly these are three very well-conducted theatres; as far as economy and discipline go—and they go very far in the theatre as everywhere else—no one could desire a better school. And in certain departments of the theatrical art no doubt much could be taught and learned in these theatres. At all of them every play that is brought out, whether old or new, and whatever its degree of importance, is always most carefully and thoroughly rehearsed in every part, and all the technical arrangements and conduct are as good as they need be. But this is not all: it is much, certainly, but not all. At two of these theatres—the St. James's and the Haymarket—the form of drama in vogue, though possibly very good of its kind, is not quite of the highest kind. If we take such work as the plays of Robertson, which have been recently played over again at the latter house, no doubt a novice might learn much that it would be good for him to know from the treatment such work gets at the hands of the Haymarket company, but it would hardly, I submit, be knowledge likely to be of much service to him in a larger and bolder school. Indeed, of how little service it could be, this company has itself, as

I have already shown, given no inconclusive proof in their recent efforts to deal with work of such a school, with work even of no higher and more serious order than *Money*, or *Plot and Passion*. Take the St. James's: good as is the work done here, and it is as good, perhaps, as we get anywhere in our theatres, the young aspirant for the highest honours of the stage would hardly find his account, I think, even in such clever and finished work as Mr. Hale and his company gave in the *Money-Spinner*: I am very sure he would not find it in their handling of such plays as *The Lady of Lyons* or *The Falcon*. There remains, then, the Lyceum, which is practically the only one of our theatres which devotes itself at all systematically to the poetical drama, or indeed, to the more serious drama at all. Now, with all respect for the great vogue of this theatre, the energy and liberality of its management, I cannot regard it as altogether a good training-ground for the young actor, anxious to recover the lost art of speaking.

'C'est une grande artiste,' said a distinguished member of the Comédie Française, who had indeed a right to play the critic, of one of the most charming and graceful of our actresses, 'C'est une grande artiste; mais il y a une chose que lui manque. C'est une toute petite chose, une chose par plus grande que mon ongle---c'est l'instruction.' Yes, it is indeed this 'little thing,' this want of instruction, that tells so fatally against even the

best and most intellectual work of our stage. Earnestness, intelligence, gaiety, feeling, grace, charm, all these useful and engaging qualities we may find in no niggard measure among our actors, but these are precisely the qualities no teacher can impart. In these the actor must be born, not made. But in the study of the English language, in its correct pronunciation, emphasis, and delivery, the very essence, in short, the vital principal of the English actor's *art*, to how many of our actors could we with any seriousness say, 'Go forth, and teach'? In the national verse of the French Drama, the rhyming Alexandrines of Corneille, and Racine, and M. Victor Hugo, we find, as Mr. Arnold has pointed out, a form wholly inadequate for the expression of the highest poetry, a form which, as Lessing pointed out before him, has really the value only of surmounted difficulties; in the national verse of the English Drama, in the blank verse of Shakespeare, we find a form to be matched only by the iambic of the Greek tragedians. Yet consider in what fashion the French artists will deal with that inadequate form, with such verse, for example, as

* Couronner tour-a-tour l'esclave, et la princesse — *

and in what fashion our English deal with such verse as

‘Your wife Octavia, with her modest eyes
And still conclusion.’

And after all, is it not in this, in this wedding ‘of perfect music unto noble words,’ that the highest, the most enduring charm of the actor lies? As we put aside the illusions of youth, and, in spite of all those triumphs of scene-painting and carpentry which strive to preserve those illusions still, as we come to realise the truth of Johnson’s words, ‘the stage is only a stage, and the players are only players,’ more and more clearly, I think we see this must be so, more and more dissatisfied we grow that it is not. Perhaps with the most of us it may be, as Hazlitt says, ‘the *pantomime* part of tragedy, that which gives the greatest opportunity for inexpressible dumb-show and noise,’ which tells most completely on the stage. Othello, with blazing eyes and knitted brows, may hurl Iago to the ground, while we admire, and wonder at the excellent *acting*, the admirable *mimic power* of the actor. But when there breaks upon our ear in all its dark significance that dreadful line,

‘Villain! be sure you prove my love a whore!’

then the personality of the actor vanishes, and in the verse of Shakespeare, Othello’s self speaks out. It was here, as I cannot but think, must have lain the real strength of Kean. Coleridge found him ‘not enough of a gentleman for

Othello; Sir Walter Scott, while watching his Richard, said 'he is not a Plantagenet;' even Hazlitt, the warmest and most faithful of his critics, owned that in parts of the highest tragedy he was too near extravagance, 'too constantly on the rack.' But the witnesses to his 'enchanting elocution' are without end. 'The tongue of Kean,' wrote Keats, 'must seem to have robbed the Hybla bees and left them honeyless. There is an indescribable *gusto* in his voice;—in Richard, "Be stirring with the lark tomorrow, gentle Norfolk," comes from him as through the morning atmosphere towards which he yearns.' And Hazlitt has left on record how 'the tone of voice in which he declaimed the beautiful apostrophe, "Then, O farewell!" struck on the heart like the swelling notes of some divine music, like the sound of years of departed happiness.' Alas! who that has listened to those wood-notes so native and so wild of our latest Romeo will have found any *gusto* of Hybla in

'How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night;'

any echo of departed happiness in

'Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tip-toe on the misty mountain tops,'

or in the harsh inarticulate noises and uncouth gestures with which he bids farewell to his dream of love,

‘Taking the measure of an unmade grave?’

But I will not call Mr. Irving only in evidence, lest it be said I call an exception; for it is, I believe, pretty generally agreed now, even among the most thorough of this fortunate actor’s admirers, that in his theatrical education the study of the English language and of elocution has been, to say the least, a little passed over. Let us put him by then, and take Miss Terry’s Juliet, a performance, full of charm, of sensibility, of dainty joyousness, of dainty melancholy—a performance, indeed, in so many ways attractive, if, as one of her critics has acutely remarked, we put away for the time all memories of Shakespeare. Yet who that has listened to the actress as she makes her way slowly, as it were, ‘with doubt, hesitation, and pain,’ through that magnificent invocation to Night,

‘Gallop apace, ye fiery-footed steeds!’

or through those dark forebodings,

‘I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins —’

but must have been conscious of ‘the little rift within the lute,’ of the *toute petite chose que lui manque?* And the Mercutio of Mr. Terriss, an actor of as high promise, perhaps, as any on our stage, nor, indeed, of promise only; in this

too, for all its gaiety and freshness of life, the same defect made itself no less felt. And so through all the play—for the Nurse of Mrs. Stirling, admirable indeed as it was, hardly belongs to the highest regions of poetry—until in the fifth act the harassed ear at last took some relief from the just and balanced speech of Mr. Meade, that excellent old actor, in whom, above all his fellows, still abides some echo of

‘The large utterance of the early gods.’

Yet, amply stocked indeed as London is with theatres, this, the Lyceum, is the only one that can be said to apply itself with any degree of earnestness to the higher ranges of the drama, the only one whose prosperity one could urge, if pleading the deserts of our stage, for the existence of a sounder and more serious taste! There have, it is true, of late, been in other places and at various times excursions into the domain of our Old Comedy, but these, though conducted often with taste and a right perception, have been too short and intermittent to really count for much. I have elsewhere spoken at length of these, so I need not linger over them now. A French critic, writing from London to the *Figaro*, has, I see, been obliging enough to allude to the company that has recently been performing in *The School for Scandal* at the Vaudeville, as ‘une troupe d’élite qui constitue une parfaite ensemble que

nous de nous rappelons pas avoir vu dans aucun théâtre de puis vingt ans ;' to declare indeed that 'un moment nous nous sommes cru au Théâtre Français.' Clever certainly, as I have said, was much of the performance, but it hardly seemed to me to merit such high praise as this. Nor am I quite able to go along with the English critic who was moved to such a rapture of enthusiasm by the performance of *London Assurance*, which followed *The School for Scandal*, that at last he saw in Mr. Boucicault's play 'something of the fibre of the classics of Sheridan and Goldsmith' ! Such criticism as this is no doubt very cordial and sympathetic, but it is also, I think, a little fanciful. It must be, one can understand, most gratifying to the actors at the Vaudeville, and to Mr. Boucicault, but to others, who want, if possible, to get at these things as they really are, it can hardly be quite so convincing.

It is then to the contemporary drama, to the work, both in its strength and in its weakness, so characteristic of our day, that we must turn to see our actors at their best. In their handling of such work, let us admit to the full how much cleverness there is, how much intelligence, gaiety, feeling, earnestness. Yet of the best of them, with all this cleverness, with all the ease and strength and assurance that must come from long practice and training in any school, to how many of them could we commit with any degree of

confidence the office of instructors in a school designed to redeem the heritage of Shakespeare? As one watches them at their work, or catches from afar the echoes of the plaudits so lavishly and so deservedly showered upon them, one feels, I think, a little inclined to say with the poet,

‘Your pride of life, your tireless powers,
We admire them, but they are not ours!’

And indeed they can hardly be ours, who wish to hear once more the voice of Shakespeare speaking from the stage as he spoke to our fathers—it cannot be ours, this teaching of a school which has flourished and grown famous by the exercise of qualities, great no doubt and splendid in their way, but root and branch opposed to the proper treatment of the best work—almost, one is inclined at times to think, to the proper understanding of it.

‘Mediocre professors,’ says our friend the *Evening Standard*, if I may venture once again to borrow from one to whom I already owe so much—‘mediocre professors will make mediocre pupils.’ After long disagreement with a valued friend how sweet it is to be at one with him at last! After this long sermon, this violent, and I fear, wearisome dashing of myself against the throne of order and habit, what is the moral I would draw, what the remedy I would propose? Alas! I trust the fate of Sganarelle may not

befall me if I say with him, 'Médecin vous-même ; je ne le suis point et je ne l'ai jamais été.' Yet to know what to avoid, to know where at least *not* to go, is perhaps the first step to an advance in the right direction. 'It must also follow,' wrote Lessing to the actors at the Hamburg theatre, 'that no false accentuation lead us to suspect that the actor is chattering what he does not understand. He must convince us by a firm assured tone of voice that he is penetrated by the full meaning of his words.' It seems to me that the necessity of this power of conviction is—I will not say the *one* thing needful, but certainly one of the things most needful to be impressed upon our young actors to-day. And this power will come only with a good and sound education. When we have really come to realise how essential this education is to the actor, how essential it is that he should, first, and above all else, be thoroughly grounded in a correct knowledge and delivery of the English language—when he, too, has come to realise this, we shall at least have done something towards establishing a true school of English acting. And we shall then, too, I hope, be doing something towards establishing a clearer sense of the true relationship of such work as Shakespeare's to our stage ; towards awakening our actor's minds, and our own minds, to the knowledge that for a method adequate to the true expression of his genius, so far as that

genius can be expressed in the theatre, they must go not to the brisk tumultuous school of modern melodrama, not to the ill-bred inanities of modern comedy, but rather to that high and severe style which tradition still preserves in the House of Molière.

THE END.

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CORRECTIONS.

- Page 37, *for* "and those which grown out of the" *read* "and those which grow out of the."
- " 76, " "representation" *read* "representative."
- " 130, " "againt" *read* "against."
- " 138, " "But of the others, Farquhar, stands" *read* "But of the others, Farquhar stands."
- " " " "The Revolution of 1688 had gradually cleared the atmosphere of many things besides, which were not, as the apostle James says, convenient," *read* "The Revolution of 1688 had gradually cleared the atmosphere of many things besides James, which were not, as the apostle says, convenient."
- " 161, " "How wit and folly, elegance and awkward imitation of it" *read* "How wit and folly, elegance and the awkward imitation of it."
- " 145, " "Bancroft's" *read* "Bancrofta."
- pp. 146-7, " "Coleman" *read* "Colman."
- Page 177, " "the fire-side concerns of Robertson's" *read* "the fire-side concerns of Robertson."
- " 186, " "he took the measure of his actors; and the measure too, one may say, of his audience;" *read* "he took the measure of his actors, and the measure too, one may say, of his audience,"
- " 196, " "shorter, and more violent" *read* "shorter and more violent."
- " 212, " "whose sympathy with the art Mr. Arnold has himself" *read* "whose sympathy with art Mr. Arnold has himself."
- " 215, " "good stag-manager" *read* "good stage manager."
- " 217, " "mais il y a une chose que lui manque" *read* "mais il y a une chose qui lui manque."
- " " " "par plus grande" *read* "pas plus grande."
- " 221, " "toute petite chose que lui manque" *read* "toute petite chose qui lui manque."
- pp. 222-3. " *read* "une troupe d'élite qui constitue un plus parfait ensemble que nous ne nous rappelons pas avoir vu dans aucun théâtre depuis vingt ans."
- Page 223, " "cru" *read* "crus."

